*Social Work & Social Sciences Review 15(2) pp.38-56. DOI: 10.1921/*095352211X636494

Action research in local authority practice:
A path to learning and professional development for work with at-risk families

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Abstract: *In Denmark social work has been widely criticized, mostly by Danish local authorities performing social work among children and adolescents. The criticism has been centred on social work not being sufficiently qualified and not meeting the standards set by politicians and legislation. This criticism has led to a growing political and societal pressure to professionally upgrade social work in this area, thereby making practice more knowledge-based. One way to do this could be the use of interactive research targeting the professional development of social work practice among local authorities. The article presents a concrete action research project in a large Danish local authority, involving the professional development of social work practice with at-risk families.*

Key words: *professional development; interactive research,learning theory principles; practice research; team learning; learning circle*

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Introduction

For several years, there has been recurring criticism of the social work performed by Danish local authorities involving children and adolescents for not being sufficiently qualified and not meeting the standards set by politicians and legislation. This criticism has led to growing political and societal pressure to professionally upgrade social work in this area, to ensure that the work is based on research more than seems to have been the case so far. From a research point of view, one way to make practice more knowledge-based could be the use of interactive research targeting professional development of social work practice in local authorities. Action research is a particularly well-suited form of research as it requires commitment to action from both the field and the researcher involved.

In this article I will discuss the challenges and opportunities of action research when used for the professional development of social work practice, compare action research to other types of interactive research, and introduce action research approaches based on democratic and learning theory principles. The article also reports on a concrete action research project in a large Danish local authority, involving the professional development of social work practice with at-risk families. Lastly, the article will reflect on the advantages, disadvantages and challenges posed by applying action research as a method for the professional development of social work practice.

Interactive research – practice research – practitioner research – action research

Traditionally, the context in which research is carried out is one in which the strength of the research is determined by its ability to pass peer review within its scientific field (that is, whether it is accepted by fellow researchers). Interactive practice-oriented research, on the other hand, is carried out in a context in which the strength of the research is determined by its ability to create practical insights which can help develop new products in a specific workplace. The concept of interactive research refers to research aiming to interact with practice in such a way that the research produced is applied in practice. Interactive research is based on a range of different methodological approaches, using concepts like practice research, practitioner research and action research. Within these concepts, there are various strands and directions, sharing some similarities yet clearly distinguishable in other respects. This article will primarily focus on action research, and it starts out by clarifying how action research differs from practice research and practitioner research.

Epstein (2001) defines practice research as a research approach based on the application of research-inspired principles, designs and data collection methods

to investigate practice in order to come up with answers to questions that may enlighten practice. In reality, however, the process usually starts with researchers doing some research, trying to cooperate or interact with practice in various ways, hoping to persuade practice to apply their research results and further develop the practice field in question. There is rarely any pre-agreed commitment from practice to apply the research results, which means that the scope for researchers to bring about changes in this field is limited.

Practitioner research can be defined as research in which the practitioner researches their own practice by using scientific methodology to produce results that may help change or upgrade practice. Practitioner research is often carried out, headed or supervised by a qualified researcher (Jarvis 2002; Ramian 2010; Kildedal 2009).

By contrast, action research can be described as a formally agreed binding interaction between field and researcher, with the express intention of changing or developing a given professional practice, based on the assumption that knowledge about the field's learning profile can help choose actions that will change the state of affairs or practice of a given field. A characteristic of action research is that the researcher participates actively in finding solutions to practical problems in cooperation with others, and that for the researcher this participation also constitutes a learning process (Gustavsen & Sørensen 1995, 55).

Action research started in the USA in the 1940s as a protest against the traditional positivistic research approach of the time. Kurt Lewin (1997), among others, maintained that traditional researchers had a rigid, preconceived conception of human reaction. Lewin stressed the importance of engaging with real-life problems and studying them in their context, and he developed an action research model which has formed the basis of a large number of projects. The model describes the phases of an action research project, the point of departure being a real-life problem with which the 'client' contacts the researcher, in order to gain help in finding a solution. Based on a general idea of the nature of the problem, followed by more detailed examination of it (research), a course of 'actions' (initiatives or measures) are planned, to be continuously adjusted and adapted on the basis of the ongoing research into the 'actions' (Lewin 1997)

In the 1960s and 1970s, action research spread to Europe, and, especially in Scandinavia, it became an important part of a new kind of critical, action-oriented social science research. However, action research soon split into two directions: a leftist progressive strand and a technocratic-functional tradition. The former approach aimed to find new ways of solving societal problems, and was often described as 'liberation sociology research', implying strong opposition to the Establishment. This direction was characterised by solidarity with the underprivileged groups of society and a tendency to blur the boundaries between researcher and social or political activist. The other direction, the technocratic- functional tradition, usually has as its primary objective to 'further develop or implement a politically decided concept or programme', aiming to 'develop social technologies to solve specific

social problems' (Clausen et al. 1992, 17). Since then, action research has further branched out into a multitude of rather diverse directions.

Action research in the field of social work draws mainly on the technocratic-functional approach, but today tends to place a stronger emphasis on dialogue and democratic aspects instead of merely helping to 'further develop or implement a politically decided concept or programme', which today is, however, also an important part of action research. Action research into at-risk families will, for instance, always be subject to certain restrictions when it comes to developing professional social work practice, consisting of the policy context as expressed in rules, regulations and ministerial circulars specifying clearly, both the legal and the ideological, intentions, which both field and action researchers must abide by.

Organisational learning is a must - for social work to develop professionally

Organisational learning implies that an organisation can only learn if its members, individually as well as a group, take part in a number of learning processes. These learning processes are necessary for the learning outcomes to become embedded, both in the individual member and in the organisation as a whole. That is, organisational learning can only occur if its members recognise that a situation is problematic, or that the organisation is in need of general professional development. In either case, nothing will happen unless the members commit themselves to change on behalf of the institution (Argyris et al. 1985; Senge 1999). As an organisation can only learn through the individuals who embody it, what is needed is a learning theory perspective focusing on the individual in the agency as the only active force capable of effecting change. Consequently, action research requires working methods that initiate learning and reflection processes aimed at motivating staff to want to become involved, to change the organisation in the desired direction.

Peter Senge (1999) has developed a theory on organisational learning which may be very useful in this connection. In his theory, Senge describes five disciplines needed for an organisation to become and remain a learning institution. The cornerstone is systems thinking – also called the fifth discipline - which is about seeing 'the whole' rather than the parts, in order to understand complex interrelationships in an organisation. Senge calls it a framework for looking at connections between the parts rather than the parts themselves, and studying patterns of change rather than focusing on 'snapshots' of change. It is within this framework that the learning structures that are apparent in the way the organisation works must be investigated, before deciding where and how to initiate learning processes.

Senge refers to the other four disciplines as the core disciplines. They include: personal mastery, mental models, building shared visions, and team learning. Personal

mastery relates to individual staff members' personal development and thus also to the individual's competences and abilities to create results. Whether an organisation is able to learn depends on whether its staff collectively possesses sufficient levels of 'personal mastery', and whether they are willing to use it to learn, individually as well as collectively , in order to help develop their agency. . Personal mastery also plays a role in the next discipline, working with 'mental models'. Mental models are deeply ingrained assumptions and generalisations that affect how a person understands the world. They can sometimes constrict an individual's way of thinking, making them unable to see any alternative to how things are usually done. To effect change, these mental models need to be brought to the surface, challenged, tested and discussed in order to change them and make it possible to do things differently.

The next discipline 'building shared visions' concerns the need for all members of the organisation to share a vision for the future, one that can motivate them to become involved and help move the agency in the direction dictated by the shared vision. Having a shared vision is vital for a learning organisation, says Senge, because only a shared vision can create the focus and energy needed to create individual, and in the long-term, organisational learning. But according to Senge, it is the learning taking place in the agency's teams that is the main driver for change, as these teams are in effect a sort of micro-cosmos for learning in the entire institution. Insights gained in organisational teams, transformed into new competences, are likely to spread to other individuals and other teams in the agency. Team results often set the tone, thus establishing a standard for shared learning throughout the entire organisation (Senge 1999).

The reason why Senge's theory on teams as the pivot for organisational learning is so interesting in this context is the fact that the staff in local authorities are usually organised in teams, which are the hub of practical social work. It is these teams that discuss the complex of problems surrounding families who either contact the local authorities for help to solve a wide range of social problems, or who are contacted by the system in response to reports about concerns over the wellbeing of a specific child. It is in these teams that knowledge and experience is put into practice, to arrive at a solution judged by professionals to be the best in a given situation. The process and the outcome must be justified professionally, based on extensive knowledge about the field. However, as mentioned above, social work is often criticised for being performed without sufficient theoretical foundations, which makes the need for evidence-based social work all the more acute. Action research can help develop the quality of knowledge and ultimately the social work performed in a local authority.

To achieve this end, it is essential to start by developing competences through cooperation with the teams responsible for the work performed. By using the cooperation with these teams as the pivot for organisational learning new knowledge will be generated, this will then become embedded in the concepts and thoughts of the agency (its shared memory). It has been customary in local authority practice

to seek new knowledge mainly by having individual staff members participate in professional upgrading or continuing education. However, not all local authorities have arrangements for turning this 'acquisition' of new knowledge into shared knowledge, and in many cases it probably never does. As a consequence, new knowledge often only forms part of the individual's competences, not of the organisation's shared memory. To ensure that new knowledge becomes part of the organisation's shared knowledge, learning processes should instead be planned and organised round the local authority's social work team structure.

Forms of knowledge in action research into local authority practice

In the following the focus will be on the types of knowledge that may be applied to solving a real-life problem that a local authority might contact an action researcher about, to enlist his or her help in upgrading the level of professionalism in their social work with at-risk families

'In action science we seek knowledge that will serve action', writes Argyris (et al.) in *Action Science* (1985) and continues

> The actions scientist is an interventionist who seeks to promote learning in the client system and to contribute to general knowledge. This is done by creating conditions for valid inquiry in the context of practical deliberation by members of the client system.

According to Argyris, this has three implications: *First* that knowledge must be designed with the human mind in view, and by taking account of the limited information-seeking and processing capabilities of human beings in the action context. *Second* that knowledge should be relevant to the forming of purposes as well as to the achieving of purposes already formed. It will not do to assume that intentions and goal are given. And the *third* implication is that knowledge must take account of the normative dimension, in answering the practical question: 'What shall I do?' (Argyris et al. 1985, 37).

So, as Argyris' approach states *the first knowledge* a researcher needs is knowledge about the staff members' learning potential and the level of their motivation for development. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many public organisations, not least local authorities, were subjected to so much restructuring that researchers in the field have talked about a veritable boom in public administration initiatives aiming to bring about change in the public sector (Antonsen & Beck Jørgensen 2000). Many local government staff report 'change fatigue' in the wake of these constant demands for change and reorganisation. In the local authority that will be used as an example later on, the following statement was made in one of the opening interviews, 'We're so fed up with all the things that keep on coming at us

from the top. We've been invited to so many weddings, but hardly ever to a funeral!' What the person is saying is that in recent years there has been an abundance of change and development projects initiated, implemented and run by management, but that many of them just fizzle out, without ever being formally closed. Bearing in mind that development and change can only ever occur if the staff members feel committed to the process, it is sometimes a good idea for the researcher to start out by 'researching' the way the staff members see the situation and how they feel about the project. This type of research can be done by interviewing selected staff members to hear their evaluation of the present competences available in the organisation and the types of learning processes that might motivate new learning in the specific context; an added benefit is that it provides a good basis for the future cooperation. Once the project has started, the learning processes applied during the realisation of the project must be researched on an ongoing basis to evaluate which learning processes, and thus which 'actions', prove the most suitable.

The second kind of knowledge, Argyris (1985) says, must be relevant to forming the purposes of the specific project. In action research projects about professional development of social work with at-risk families, this means that the existing knowledge about professional social work in this area must be researched, but it also means that it is necessary to introduce various forms of new knowledge in order to successfully develop the quality of social work. Argyris mentions two concepts that may be used as a point of departure for studying and working with knowledge forms: *espoused theory* and *theory-in-use*. Espoused theories are those that an individual claims to follow, and theory-in-use is the often tacit cognitive maps by which human beings design action (Argyris et al. 1985). Action research into social work requires that the researcher, together with the field, investigates what the espoused theory is, while at the same time trying to make the theory-in-use explicit. In social work with at-risk families, the purpose is often to make professional social work more knowledge-based by designing new espoused theories and transforming them into theory-in-use, to create a better alignment of the two theories and the actions resulting from them.

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) have identified *four learning processes* that demonstrate how competence can change from tacit – or silent – knowledge into explicit knowledge.

Figure 1
Four learning processes

Learning process	Situation	Effect on competence
Socialisation	Everyday work	From tacit to tacit
Externalisation	Dialogue and reflection	From tacit to explicit
Combination	Strategy processes	From explicit to explicit
Internalisation	Trying out with new things	From explicit to tacit

The figure shows that in the course of everyday work a mutual *socialisation process* takes place during which primarily tacit knowledge is transferred: 'learning by doing' by working with others. To develop more competences, there has to be an *externalisation* of the tacit knowledge. This can happen via dialogue with co-workers, reflection and interpretation of experiences from work. *Combination* implies that the organisation combines their own experiences (the externalised knowledge) with theory (e.g. through education of staff members). In addition, these theories must be coupled with the organisation's intentions and goals, which in this case will always be subject to the state's goals and intentions as expressed in the current legislation in the field. *Internalisation* occurs when the outcome of the newly acquired knowledge is converted into new plans and work routines (Nonaka & Takeuchi, here in Marnburg 2001).

To make sure that the acquired knowledge does not remain individual knowledge only but is converted into shared memory, the combination process must take place in a professional community. In this case, that would be the teams already existing in the organisation and which constitute the force field for learning (Senge 1995). The combination processes must be characterised by dialogue because this process is the most important element in a democratic system, and is the very cornerstone of any dynamic development founded on information-based decisions (Marnburg 2001).

The third implication mentioned by Argyris is that knowledge must take account of the normative dimension by answering the practical question: 'What shall I do?' (Argyris et al. 1985, 37). When working with at-risk families, social work has to take its starting point in the ideologies expressed in legislation and ministerial circulars. The 'profession' furthermore requires that social work must be based on 'evidence-based knowledge'. The homepage of the Danish SFI Campbell institute[1] states that although 'evidence' is usually defined as 'hard facts', solid well-documented knowledge, when it comes to social work the concept of evidence is more complex. Here, evidence can be understood as 'the best current knowledge' available on a particular issue. Therefore it is vital to make an effort to find this knowledge and not just settle for the most easily accessible or most convenient knowledge on offer. The best current knowledge is found by being systematic in the search for it. A thorough critical review of the knowledge available in a field will often reveal that the degree of evidence varies considerably; but also that a high degree of evidence is not always easy to obtain. In such cases the best current knowledge may, for instance, be statements from experts or one's own or colleagues' personal experiences. According to the international Campbell Collaboration,

> the most reliable evidence is obtained from systematic and well-designed effect measurements, especially several measurements which together may offer a reliable estimate of whether an intervention has an effect or not. A systematic research review is usually the best qualitative form of evidence-based research, since it will be the result of a systematic effort to reduce potential sources of error.

So, in social work evidence-based knowledge is understood as more than simply research results. Here 'evidence' has a broader meaning; also, it is not limited to knowledge about effect only. Effect is just one of the many questions that evidence-based policy and practice may wish to obtain more knowledge or evidence about. Therefore action research works with and researches into knowledge about the learning potential of the organisation and its staff, i.e. the espoused theory in force and the current theory-in-use, just as it seeks to involve different forms of evidence-based knowledge and combine it with the knowledge already available. Furthermore, the researcher will seek to develop new knowledge that may be applied in similar systems

How to handle different forms of knowledge at the practical level

Using the knowledge forms mentioned above, I will now classify the various forms of knowledge: 'Big' theories, understood as theories recognised by professionals as the best current knowledge in a given field; empirical knowledge from research, and finally experience from actual practice. However, in social work there is a fourth type of knowledge that is also very important: interpersonal knowledge produced in interactions between families and social workers (Kildedal 2005). On the basis of the above understanding of the types of knowledge, an action researcher can operate with three categories of knowledge:

- *Local knowledge* (espoused theory, theory-in-use and interpersonal knowledge).
- *Pre-existing or prior knowledge* ('big theories', evidence-based empirical research results)
- *Co-generated knowledge/theory* (knowledge/theory generated and applicable in both the specific and similar systems)

The special thing about this type of action research (development of the professional level in social work) is that in order to upgrade the knowledge platform for the practical social work, the researcher must strive not only to do research to uncover local knowledge but also to combine pre-existing knowledge with it. This will be the case when the work performed is not sufficiently knowledge-based and an infusion of new information is needed, or when an action research project is to be used to develop a new knowledge base to provide a team with a shared professional platform.

To accommodate the democratic aspect and the learning-theory approach as well as integrating various forms of knowledge in the project, it is a good idea to

design the process in such a way that the researcher and the participants become joint 'owners' of the project. It is also important to establish a framework that allows continuous interaction between researcher and field on the knowledge and learning generated in the course of the process. The interaction between researcher and field may be summed up as follows:

Figure 2
Interaction between researcher and field

The tasks of the participants *Develop practice*	Joint tasks *Cooperate, plan and manage*	The tasks of the researcher *Do research*
Produce data Generate new knowledge Test new knowledge Decide new knowledge platform	Formulate problems, goals and sub-goals Manage the process Study learning processes Solve any conflicts arising Support the process	Collect data Analyse data Generate new knowledge Describe new knowledge platform
Convert knowledge into practice Implement shared knowledge platform	Facilitate development processes Support implementation	Research into learning processes Support conversion process
Retain and further develop new knowledge platform	Close cooperation between researcher and field	Generate general knowledge

The middle column of the model shows the elements of action research that are joint activities involving both the researcher and the field. Generally speaking, they represent the democratic elements of action research: cooperation on management of the process based on the research performed, conflict management and planning of the implementation of the outcome of the project. To the right are the researcher's tasks, which primarily involve doing the research and making the results available to the field. To the left, the participants' tasks, which are to produce the data that the researcher collects and uses for analysis. As should be evident by now, in this type of action research the researcher has a special obligation to provide the organisation with relevant knowledge that can interact with the knowledge present within it already. Finally, it is the researcher's duty to seek to develop general knowledge, applicable in similar contexts.

A case-study: Action research into local authority practice

In the following I am going to describe an action research project in a large Danish local authority, which was carried out on the basis of the principles outlined above. The background for this project was strong criticism in the press of the local authority's social work in a few concrete cases. This resulted in a situation where social work performed in the local authority in general was presented as being of inferior quality and open to criticism from all sides. The politicians responsible for the local authority's social policy decided to have the quality of the social work involving at-risk children and families investigated and, if necessary, initiate measures to improve and develop quality. An agreement was signed between the local authority and the Aalborg University, represented by me, to initiate an action research project to investigate and evaluate the professional quality of social work, and to contribute towards quality improvement. The project lasted just over a year. The first six months were spent 'researching' the field, and based on the outcome of this research an intervention course was planned. The project was followed by a coordinating group and a steering committee who were involved on an ongoing basis in the analysis of the research results and in the planning of the learning process based on these results. First, a document analysis of 47 randomly selected case files was made, followed by a number of focus interviews with social workers and department heads from the four teams responsible for the work performed. Both the investigation of the professional quality of the case files and the interviews were carried out on the basis of a memorandum on professional standards required in social work. Basically, the memorandum stated that the 'profession' of social work requires an explicit theoretical foundation, relevant ethical considerations, systematic description, analysis and evaluation, and consistency between this part of the work and the remedies and measures initiated. Furthermore it stated that the analysis of the case files would also focus on observance of good administrative practice as described in the legal definitions of the act. The memorandum had been discussed in advance with the steering committee and with key persons in the local authority, who had all given their approval of its perspective.

The conclusion regarding the analysis of the case files was that the files to some extent complied with good administrative practice, but that there were major shortcomings in their description of the professional content of the case work. There was little consistency in the way descriptions, analyses and evaluations were recorded in the case files, and there were very few indications of the knowledge on which decisions were made. Consequently, as they showed so much variation and so many inconsistencies and irregularities, it was not possible to give an overall evaluation of the quality of the professional social work performed on the basis of the case files. It was, however, possible to conclude that the electronic design of the case files was not at all supportive of professional case filing, as there were no guidelines or suggestions on how to use professional terminology in the files. The

electronic file consisted of blank pages only, and it was left entirely to the individual case workers to devise a structure of their own.

The interviews focused on examining the social workers' and their supervisors' perception of their own professional standard. Again the memorandum was used as a starting point for the staff's own evaluation of their compliance with the criteria for professional standards stated in it. This part of the research showed that both the social workers and their department heads felt that the individual social worker had high professional standards, but the interviews also revealed that there was no common or shared knowledge base for their work. The interviews showed that by and large social work was performed at the discretion of the individual social worker, based on his or her own professional standards; that is, quality very much depended on the competences of the individual social worker. Another conclusion was that the department heads had too many purely administrative duties and said they lacked time for professional supervision of the department's professional work.

The final analysis of the level of professional quality in the local authority was presented in the context of three categories, the first category being a professional unit in which the staff generally have poor qualifications, usually due to years of insufficient professional upgrading or continuous education. In such a unit there is a lack of knowledge, and development will require an infusion of knowledge. The second category is a professional unit that has a shared professional platform (theories and values), which has been fully implemented so that all staff members perform their work on the basis of this shared platform. The third category is characterised by individual staff having a high level of professional standard but the unit having no common professional foundation. Therefore the staff lack a common language, and metaphorically they act like little semi-autonomous 'satellites', each flying as it sees fit. To develop and improve professional standards in such a unit, it is necessary to make sure all the 'satellites' start flying in some kind of formation.

The overall conclusion to the investigation of the level of professional quality in the local authority was that it fitted into the third category. There was no indication that the professional standard for social work in the local authority was poor – in fact, the opposite might be said to be the case. It was concluded that 'there is an insufficient common professional foundation for the social work performed, which means that the conditions for improving and developing professionalism are not available' (Kildedal & Verwohlt 2009)[2]. On the basis of the investigation, it was decided to continue the project, in order to develop and implement a shared professional platform. And this became the starting signal for the 'action part' of the research project.

'Actions' during the process

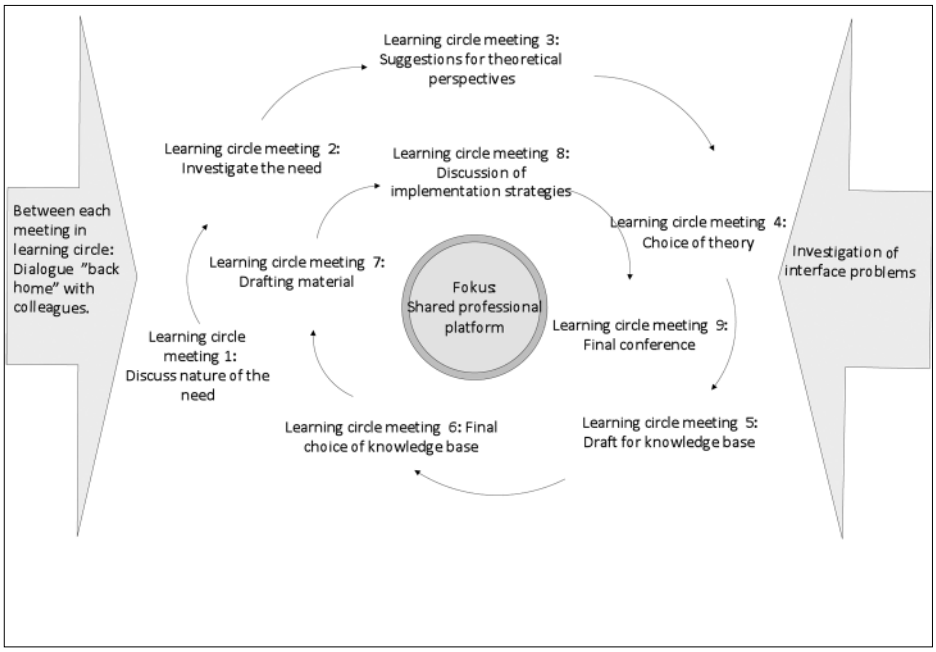
The goal for this part of the project was to find a common knowledge base, to be put in writing, and to decide a plan for implementation at the end of the project. Using the theories described above as the basis for the next steps, it was decided to use the four teams in the organisation as the point of departure; that they should become the pivot of the process. Due to the size of the local authority, it was not expedient to involve all staff members in the process of formulating the shared professional platform. But bearing in mind the importance of making the process democratic, a model was designed around a 'learning circle' consisting of a social worker and a department head from the four teams, plus representatives from the local authority's day-care and residential care institutions for children and adolescents. These representatives were included because there was a need to sort out a number of professional issues related to cooperation between the two parts of the local authority administration. Dialogues between the participants in the learning circle, and between the participants and their colleagues back in their own teams, constituted the fundamental idea of the learning circle, inspired by both the democratic and the learning theory approach. The intention was to involve as many as possible in the development of the shared professional platform, to secure the commitment of all staff members and to motivate them to take ownership of the platform eventually formulated.

The work in the learning circle became the pivot of the process of assembling and discussing wishes and requirements in relation to the shared professional platform, deciding which to include and finally formulating the shared professional platform. The process revolved around a series of dialogue meetings, discussing and working with forms of knowledge and uncovering local knowledge (theory-in-use, espoused theories etc.) and suggestions for how to transform the new knowledge into actions in future. At this stage, the cooperation between researcher and the participants in the learning circle also included discussions on which forms of pre-existing knowledge (big theories, empirical research results etc.) should be included in the designing of the new platform. The process is outlined in the model below.

As can be seen in the model, the setup of the learning circle included eight meetings and a final conference. About 16 persons participated in each learning circle meeting, and some 250 (the entire staff) were invited to the final conference. Before finally arriving at a result acceptable to all parties involved, a wide range of research methods had been applied. To set the work in motion, a questionnaire survey among social workers was used to learn more about the knowledge base they were working from at the start of the process, and what they thought should be included in a future shared professional platform as well as the requirements it would need to fulfil.

Analyses of the questionnaires showed, among other things, that the present 'local knowledge' had its roots in a systems approach, which then became the starting

Figure 3
Learning circle meetings



point for the following part of the work. The next steps in the process took place through both written and face-to-face dialogues between researcher and learning circle, and between the learning circle and the four teams. The written part mainly consisted of minutes or a summary of discussions at the learning circle meetings, listing a range of issues to be discussed in the four teams, to give them a chance to voice their opinion to their representative in the learning circle.

Through this process, a shared professional platform was eventually produced, based largely on a systems approach. This platform was formulated as a 25-page document, which was presented at a final conference for all involved staff members and made available in print and electronically. At the conference the document was presented orally to the entire staff, and the management then presented the implementation strategy. This strategy outlined the training programmes and other forms of support to aid implementation in the teams and in the individual staff member's daily work. Development of an electronic case file system was also initiated, using the terminology of the document, and intended to create more consistency in the description of social work with at-risk families across the local authority.

Reflections on theory vs. practice

Finding an answer to the Argyris' question 'What shall I do?' is by no means easy (Argyris et al. 1985). Finding out what constitutes the best current knowledge about the field is in itself quite a challenge, and once it has been uncovered, the next question is how to convert it into professional social work actions targeting at-risk families. In fact, this is *the* challenge in the profession of social work. In this connection it makes sense to return to Senge's theory about teams as the pivot and driving force in an organisation working with 'conversion processes' (that is, turning theory into concrete, practical action) and using it as a starting point for deliberations on how to take the next step, 'converting' new theories into actions.

Practical social work can be described as the process of deciding which actions, out of a number of possible alternatives, to choose in a complex world and, says Payne (2006), this explains why a theory or a perspective should always be accompanied by a model offering explicit guidance. However, new knowledge far from always points to a model or includes guidelines on what to do, so in real life it is often left to practical social work to convert knowledge into action. As Payne points out, it is one of the characteristics of professional social work that it involves combining and converting different forms of knowledge, values and experience into practice. He goes on to say that there is general agreement that practice must necessarily be eclectic, but that care must be taken to avoid relying on theories that conflict or stray too far from main theory applied. Therefore it is vital that an eclectic approach is applied in a consistent and carefully designed manner, testing the choices and decisions made in a team of professionals rather than doing it on an individual, more or less arbitrary basis (Payne 2006, 50).

When testing decisions in a team of colleagues, the individual social worker must be able to account for the knowledge that his or her decisions are based on and the likely outcome of the action, and to argue why this particular solution is to be preferred over alternatives. To be able to do this, the teams responsible for making decisions must develop work routines and use working methods that draw on the agreed knowledge base or shared platform in their argumentation.

Professional development of social work: Who is being targeted in action research?

This article started out by describing a learning theory approach to action research, arguing that inspiration from theories on learning organisations could be useful in an action research project intended to develop professional social work practice. As explained above, the approach points back to a technocratic-functional line of

thought also referred to as the socio-technical approach to action research. This approach, in combination with a learning theory perspective, is well suited for working with local authority practice in social work.

However, it also makes sense to consider the perspective of Reason and Bradbury (2001): 'Actions research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worldwide human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview, which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and praxis, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities' (Reason & Bradbury 2001, 1). The reason why this perspective makes sense in this context is that it revolves around the question: Who is action research supposed to help? Ultimately, what action research into social work with at-risk families aims to do is improve conditions for these families. In this type of project, it does so in an indirect way, by supporting the professional development of the frontline staff working with these families. Looking at it in the light of Reason and Bradbury's definition, for the researcher the perspective 'worldwide human purposes' is to help produce highly qualified, knowledge-based social work that will eventually benefit at-risk families, through a high professional standard of the help and support they are offered. When Reason and Bradbury state that the purpose of engaging in action research is to 'produce practice knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives', the knowledge they talk about is, of course, the knowledge of the professionals, but definitely also the knowledge generated in the interaction between social worker and field, referred to above as interpersonal knowledge. This type of knowledge builds on the very essence of social work: that it is the individual human being who 'possesses the most profound knowledge of himself', and that social work is essentially about facilitating developmental and learning processes in people. When working with at-risk families, knowledge about the learning processes of the individual human being and the individual family can only emerge if the social worker seeks consciously to create a 'learning environment' when interacting with the family. In that way an action research project based on a learning theory approach can also be seen as an 'exemplary' approach because the participants add to their own experience by working with learning processes that they may later use in their daily work with at-risk families.

One of the main challenges of working with action research is ensuring that the project becomes a participatory, democratic process. When researching in a local authority context, creating democratic processes is indeed a challenge. Here the researcher will find him- or herself placed between, at one end, the staff members and, at the other, the political and strategic management. In this field of tension, there is a potential for conflict between the participants and the researcher, between

the researcher and the management, as well as among the participants. This aspect of action research means that the researcher, in addition to his or her competences in research, may also need competences in conflict management. In the case above, local authority practice, the conflict is often about staff wanting extra resources if the development process involves changes that they see as demanding more time. The response from management and politicians will often be that the development process must take place within the existing framework, which then determines the conditions that the researcher works under. The dilemma for the action researcher, in this as in many other situations, is that they can offer advice but not make decisions; the researcher is unable to fulfil the demands of the staff, even if agreeing that the demands are reasonable.

Action research differs from other types of research especially in two ways: the research is participant-oriented, which means that to an agreed extent the participants are involved in the research, and the researcher is actively involved in initiating the development processes. As for the former, the implication is that there has to be a close, democratic interaction between researcher and field. As for the latter, the implication is that the researcher is physically present in many and very diverse situations. As a result, the competences of the action researcher play a major role in the success and outcome of the action research project. The role of the researcher can be discussed from the following positions: the researcher plays a high-profile role (runs the project); or researcher and field play equal roles (a participatory design); or the researcher has a low-profile role (contributes, but the project is run mainly by others) (Gustavsen & Sørensen 1995).

In the type of action research discussed here, the researcher plays a high-profile role. This role makes great demands on the researcher's competence in working with processes; on the one hand conducting the research using democratic principles, on the other striving to achieve the goals agreed with the field beforehand. This type of project will often be initiated on the basis of a formal agreement with the management, implying obviously that the management expects certain results which the researcher is expected to deliver. This means, at a practical level, that the first meetings with the persons expected to 'develop' are extremely important. It is vital that the researcher tries very hard to build up a relationship of trust with the participants, bearing in mind that there is an inherent conflict between the strategic management's wishes for speedy, effective results and the very nature of the human learning process. It is possible to force through a learning process, but lasting and constructive results can only be achieved if the learners want to achieve them and, as stated above, organisational learning is only possible if the members of the organisation want to participate. This is where the researcher's own learning process comes into the picture. The researcher will have to work with those of his or her own competences required by the specific field and the people involved in it, which will affect the researcher's cooperative competences and teach him new ways of handling conflicts or managing processes.

When Reason and Bradbury write that

> the wider purpose of action research is to contribute through this practical knowledge to the increased well-being – economic, political, psychological, spiritual of human persons and communities and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part. (Reason & Bradbury 2001, 2)

it follows that the action researcher needs to see him- or herself in a much wider perspective. So action research is also about communicating the knowledge acquired about at-risk children and families, be it in an educational context or in articles or statements to the press, to influence socio-political decisions made regarding at-risk families. Action research into social work is thus to be understood as more than just one single project: the real issue is the sum of help and support offered to families at risk. Reason and Bradbury also talk about action research 'as a way of being part of the world'. This way of putting it makes a lot of sense to someone like me, who is strongly involved in the socio-political aspects of social work and who sees the objective of her professional life as a commitment to help improve the conditions of children and families at risk.

Notes

1 (http://www.sfi.dk/Default.aspx?ID=268)
2 The report may be downloaded at: http://www.aarhuskommune.dk/files/aak/aak/content/filer/magistratens_1._afdeling/socialafdelingen/organisationsindgangen/undersoegelser/Kildedal_til_udlevering.pdf

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