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Developing “knowledge in practise”? A Case Report from cooperation between an Academic Institution and the Child Welfare Services

Agder University College in cooperation with the local Child Welfare Service

PRAXIS South is the cooperation between Agder University College (AUC) and the local practice field. It aims to develop the field of practice by bringing research, education and practice closer together.

Praxis South currently includes Praxis Social, Praxis Child Welfare and Praxis Family Welfare. The various social work departments in the region are presented with the opportunity to be included in Praxis South for a small fee, a sort of membership fee. Resources are allocated by an administrative committee which determines Praxis South activities. A small amount of this money is spent organizing these activities coordinated by the AUC. Currently, I am responsible for coordinating Praxis Child Welfare activities, while two of my colleagues are responsible for the Social and Family Welfare activities respectively. Praxis South is organized similarly to the English network, Making research Count, with whom we have initiated an ongoing collaboration (<http://www.uea.ac.uk/swk/research/mrc/welcome.htm>).

Praxis Child Welfare was initiated five years ago, as the result of a formalised cooperation, both on a municipal and on a regional level, between the AUC and the local Child Welfare Service. This cooperation has resulted in an extensive project within the Child Welfare Service concerning evaluation routines in the Child Welfare Service, chiefly placing the focus on the evaluation of the use of remedial action plans and evaluation in Child Welfare institutions. Writing courses where child welfare workers have written articles discussing their employment, Internet-based courses which offer further education to child welfare workers, seminars, lectures and the development of research projects are examples of the further results this cooperation have had.

It is our experience that such cooperation strengthens is a strength when it comes to generating new projects; The Norwegian Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, a national distance education body, and a local competence foundation have provided us with renewed funding.

From the initial and rather traditional point of view that the Academia should impart knowledge and research, which the field of practice should then make the best possible use of; the cooperation between the AUC and the local Child Welfare Service has developed towards the current point of view that knowledge may also be developed, made visible and utilised in the field of practice. The questions of what role the Academia should play in such a process, and how the Academia, in collaboration with child welfare workers, would present the knowledge which emerges from concrete situations remains. These questions will be treated in this presentation.

We pursue knowledge development on the basis of the child welfare workers' experiences. This is knowledge which already exists, but needs to be made visible, to be emphasised, to be recognized and interpreted as a common knowledge acquired through experience. An example of such a process in which the AUC and the local Child Welfare Service has collaborated on the development of knowledge, will be described and discussed in the following paragraphs.

Knowledge concerning the collaboration between the municipal Child Welfare Service and the governmental Child Welfare Service when placing a child in foster care

The example presented in this paragraph deals with the cooperation between the municipal Child Welfare Service in Kristiansand and the governmental Fosterhome Service in region south. The latter is responsible for recruiting foster parents, arranging for foster homes to be at the disposal of the municipal Child Welfare Service, as well as for instructing and tutoring foster home members. The former approves these foster homes and enter into agreements with the foster parents concerning mutual obligations and rights for when a child is placed in their care. Furthermore, the municipal Child Welfare Service is responsible for planning in which homes the child is placed for care, for continuously observing the home and for offering advice and tutoring to the foster parents. The municipal Child Welfare Service also carries the financial responsibility for the foster home.

The two Child Welfare Services cooperate to obtain the best possible home for the child. It is a process which involves considerable challenges. In some instances the municipal Child Welfare Service has proven to lack sufficient information about the children, youth and their parents previous to the placement of the child in foster care, in other, it has also lacked information about the foster parents. Sometimes certain challenges have emerged which have put the approval process to a halt, not to be resumed. As a result, the child welfare workers both on the municipal and the governmental level have had to readjust, and start the entire process of finding an alternative home for the child all over again.

This process has been, and is, vulnerable and difficult, jeopardising the collaboration between the participants of both the municipal and the governmental Child Welfare Service. The two Child Welfare Services may accuse each other of not having the child's best interest at heart, and of being governed by alternative interests such as money and financial considerations.

Based on the aspects described previously, a committee with three representatives from the municipal Child Welfare Service, and three representatives from the governmental Child Welfare Service was appointed. The initiative to have this committee appointed initially came from the Child Welfare Director, and its purpose was to develop a common understanding of the Child Welfare Service various roles and areas of authority. Previously, there were sporadic meetings between the two, at the time however, they needed to get acquainted with each other and each other's employment. Continuing this cooperation process in a committee proved demanding due to the participants' hectic work days. Up till last autumn, the contact was gradually reduced to the strict minimum necessary whenever a child is placed in foster care.

In autumn 2004, the Child Welfare Director determined that the already established committee should be connected to professional development work in cooperation with Praxis Child Welfare. The committee assembled with a representative from the AUC present. It was agreed that the committee needed to change course; from focusing on the elaboration of roles and authority, to employing the knowledge which emerge from a concrete incident to better understand their mutual cooperation relations. Presently, the aim is, taking a concrete matter as the starting point, to acquire underlying knowledge about cooperation processes between the two Child Welfare Services. An AUC representative is responsible for the forward thrust and chairs the meetings.

What is it the committee does?

The Heads of Departments in the two Child Welfare Services meet with two collaborators from each Praxis group, 6 persons in all, not including myself. The committee meets regularly for two to three hours more or less every sixth week depending on each members schedules, as it is considered a high priority to have all participants present.

The committee chose to take a particular incident deemed successful by both parties in view of the cooperation relation, as its starting point; taking a mastering-oriented approach to the cooperation between the two Child Welfare Services. Rather than identifying problems, it thus aims to uncover aspects which promote a positive collaboration. Past conflicts were left in the past, so as to concentrate on reaching a common understanding of the relations and aspects which would promote a successful collaboration in this field.

Starting at the beginning of the chosen incident, the committee has reviewed the progress chronologically little by little. The AUC representative, offering an external point of view, asks questions to those involved in order to uncover what was being done, their assessment of the situation and the other parties involved, as well as what decisions did they made either together or apart, etc. The purpose of this process is to reveal as many nuances to and understandings of the incident as possible. The representative's main focus, however, is identifying aspects which might be of considerable importance to the collaboration between professionals in each of two the Child Welfare Services. Beyond this main theme, the committee's own themes are equally subject for research.

How far has the committee come in the knowledge development process?

Discussing this particular incident, the committee chose a retrospective perspective, and took cooperation processes which had been ended as its starting point. In order to illustrate our point of view, we intend to connect the aspects mentioned above to Schön's (1983) description of knowledge development applied to practical action. First and foremost, Schön's interest lies in making knowledge which arises from the incident itself visible, and he links knowledge development to practical action. He problematizes the opinion that practical action derives from systematic scientific knowledge, and underlines the importance of taking the situational aspects of each incident in consideration. The practical field of action is

unspecified, uncertain, complex and loaded. Actions may be defined as artistry and spontaneity in connection to the given context.

Schøn describes knowledge in practice as being a three-staged process; Knowing-in-action, Reflection-in-action and Reflection-on-reflection-in-action.

This presentation focuses on the reflection-on-reflection-in-action stage. Nyhus translates this theory with a critical eye (Nyhus 2002). Reflecting upon those actions which have taken place, the committee should be able to develop new insight and understanding of past actions and processes. According to Schøn, this type of reflection should be tied directly to a single particular incident. Molander, on the other hand, find that such a process should entail personal reflection and perspective. Reflection assumes a certain degree of overview, without the focus being placed directly on the incident or the amount of time elapsed from the incident took place.

In her presentation of "the reflective process", Jan Fook (1996) rely on Schøn's work. She has developed a model for the reflection upon practice which she employs in her own research, lectures and practice.

The model includes three steps: 1) Identify and describe practice and its context in as concrete and specific terms as possible 2) Reflect upon your account. This is where she poses several critical questions such as; "What are the gaps and bias implied in my account? What perspectives are repressed, distorted and simply missing or de-emphasised" 3) Develop practice and theory e.g. *what is similar or different about this experience compared with other of my experiences?* (1996: s.5).

Fook's reflection model has inspired us in that a concrete incident becomes our starting point. We then ask questions in order to identify what is concrete and specific to that incident as well as underlying interests and understandings.

Excerpt from the reflection process

The following paragraph exemplifies this process; how it progresses and how knowledge about cooperation process emerges from concrete incidents.

Liz from the municipal Child Welfare Service called Ann representing the governmental Child Welfare Service seeking assistance in the assessment of a foster home where the parents

were about to give up the idea of being foster parents. There was a possibility that the child might need to be relocated to another home. Ann and Liz agreed on how to cooperate, what responsibilities Ann would have, and when they would meet to review the matter. They made two house calls to the foster home together, in addition, they had several conversations in which they prepared for these house calls and reflected upon the care given to the child in the home. Both had the impression that the cooperation had been successful, and also, the foster parents regained trust in their decision to be foster parents. Both Ann and Liz considered that the child was well provided for in the foster home in question.

The following excerpt includes their reflections on how they cooperated in order to ensure that certain themes would be discussed during their visit to the foster parents.

S. Could you describe the exchanges in conversation, and how you managed to uphold the structure? You needed to discuss certain themes, how?

Liz: Well...we did manage to talk about all these themes... and more.

Ann: Yes, absolutely. I actually think that when they had been talking for a while, and whenever we found that they avoided the themes we had set up to discuss, one of us would interfere in order to steer the conversation back on track by saying something like; was this what we were talking about earlier, or, is it so that you don't feel emotionally attached to him anymore, that you don't want to be in the same room as him??

Then, the conversation would usually include some episode illustrating what the boy had or had not done, and then one of us would interfere again in order to shift the focus of the conversation, don't you think so?

Liz: Yes, that was exactly it. As you said, we hadn't really planned who would be in charge of the conversation, but it seemed, just like you said, that it progressed on its own accord. We know each other, but if we hadn't, we would probably have had to plan these visits much more carefully. Perhaps it has something to do with our experience in this job too.

Ann: Yes, the conversation flowed rather easily.

Liz: It did rather flow, didn't it? We complemented each other well, and you kept focusing on the positive aspects, having agreed to look for the positive aspects beforehand I suppose we focused firmly on that, we did agree to focus on the positive things, didn't we... Did we discuss that beforehand?

Both as a third part and as an AUC representative, I do consider it my responsibility to ask questions during the process of reflection so as to force the others to reveal detailed knowledge and to promote the articulation of aspects which might seem obvious. In this case I

asked about how they cooperated to determine who would lead the conversation with the foster parents. The conversation between Ann and Liz revealed how their cooperation was based on much assumed knowledge; they knew each other, and had cooperated in similar situations both previous to the situation described above and in other situations. Both were experienced in working with foster homes, and both felt like they complemented each other. Having discussed what themes they wished to discuss beforehand, they both felt responsible for attaining this goal though they had not agreed on how to do so. To Ann and Liz planning this conversation in further details was unnecessary, as they were both looking to make the foster parents describe positive incidents taking place in their home.

When the conversation "flowed", it might be useful to mention their professional competence. In order to elaborate on what this assumed knowledge between them would be, I could have proceeded by asking them to concretise what "made it flow". However, the conversation between Ann and Liz continued and, immediately, another interesting theme emerged.

Liz: The way we cooperated, you and I, worked really well, both in terms of the dialogue and the non-verbal communication.

Ann: Sometimes during the conversation when I knew they were talking about something Liz had told me before, I would stop the conversation and ask; Liz, what is this, has this been discussed before? I would pretend I didn't know.

S: So you ask sort of naive questions?

Ann: Yes, and I ask Liz about things, though I knew that Liz had discussed those issues with them before; to emphasise a certain topic.

S: Why? What is it you hope to achieve when you already know the answer?

Ann: I'll give you an example.

Liz: I suppose it's to make them articulate the issue, so that you would hear it too.

Ann: It was part of the role I was given by Liz, I was suppose to assist her in the assessment of these foster parents and what the situation was at their home. But in order for me to understand the family, I could pretend not to know certain things and ask Liz; then, the foster parents would answer and initiate a discussion on a topic I was interested in uncovering, and which I knew they had discussed before. In this manner I got to hear their opinions, but I could also note any changes on that topic.

Liz: What you did know was that they had refused assistance and that this was a problem.

Ann: Yes, and then I asked you, Liz; are you thinking about going to Marte Meo or Familiekontoret (the Family Office, a private enterprise) to talk about how this family could work better. Liz and I would talk a little, and then, the family would interrupt us and express their point of view, explaining why they didn't want this and this, that they had talked about it before etc.

In the excerpt above, Ann explains how she communicated directly with Liz so as to get an impression of how the foster parents viewed their situation. Having Ann asking Liz questions with the family present, they initiated a conversation the family would listen to. It would then interrupt and comment on a topic articulating what it was they wanted. As an AUC representative, it is necessary for me to concretise this method further by asking Ann why she would ask Liz these questions, and how she would do it. As Ann elaborated on this topic, we all acquired insight into how Liz and her had worked together in order to force the foster parents to articulate their point of view, Ann and Liz thus established a common ground on which to make further assessments.

Such a method of cooperation exemplifies how roles and topics may be divided between those involved in this type of conversation, where one is expected to research and assess certain issues.

The two excerpts above represent 3 to 4 minutes from a 2 to 3-hour meeting. It thus goes without saying that there are an infinite number of topics to be discussed. The different participants of the committee will be interested in various topics depending on personal experience and understanding. At the end of each meeting, each member writes a small note; commenting on what seemed useful and informative during the meeting. The comments are read out aloud before the meeting reaches an end.

The cooperation between the AUC and the child welfare workers

Initially, this reflection process was not defined as research but as professional development. As the process progressed it became apparent that this retrospective reflection process, as described previously, could easily compare to any research process. Both the reflection and the research process aim to acquire new knowledge within a certain field, and the understanding on which knowledge development through research is based may also be applied to the reflection process. In this case, the collected data was, in fact, each committee members' experiences cooperating with representatives from the other Child Welfare Service.

In this manner, each participant became a co-researcher. The following paragraphs aim to point out certain distinctive features when dealing with knowledge development in ones own practice, as illustrated in this essay, and consider the similarities between the type of research described here and qualitative research. Kvale (1996) underlines two separate tendencies in qualitative research; the Miner and the Traveller. The Miner seeks knowledge by digging till the answers to his questions are found, while the Traveller makes discoveries along the way and adjusts his route according to those new findings. The work on which this essay is based would thus correspond to the Travel Metaphor.

Developing the problem for discussion

In this case, it is the field of practice that has determined what themes should be researched. The process was initiated by the Child Welfare Director, and the committee which took on this project chose the themes and problems for discussion during its first meeting. The group that felt they needed the knowledge at hand placed the focus on knowledge development. In research as such; the choice of topic is largely governed by the researches' personal interests, what research programs offer relevant means, political areas of commitment and the business and industry interests.

Choosing a method

The next step in any research process is choosing a method, that is, how new knowledge is obtained. The method for this project was developed by the committee, as it chose to reflect upon its own practice, and to have an AUC representative present asking questions. This method undoubtedly entails taking a qualitative approach to the project. The committee was interested in uncovering the depth, variety and particular incidents in connection to the one particular case. It was never an aim per se to develop generalised knowledge; however, it was found that the new insight could help establish a more extensive basis and a new perspective from which to reflect on similar situations.

Interview

The AUC representative's role as the interviewer may be compared to the qualitative interview. The intention was to form as complete a picture as possible of the professional experiences from this type of collaborations. On the subject qualitative research interviews Kvale has written (1996, p. 27):

The purpose of the qualitative research interviews discussed here (in Interview) is to understand themes of the lived daily world from the subjects own perspectives

This definition corresponds exactly to the intention of the committee, which is to map out the daily world of the informants, their interpretation of and thoughts on the cooperation processes in which they have be involved.

The interview, however, was more similar to a conversation than a stringent interview. The AUC representative saw to that the main focus remained on the theme – cooperation. She would halt the conversation to explore certain aspects and to underline ways of understanding concrete situations, like the excerpts illustrated previously in this essay.

The committee participated too; asking each other questions, conducting a conversation. In this manner, all the participants would research any particular incident together.

In research the method described above may be referred to as a focus group, where much interest equally lies in the knowledge which emerges as the committee participants interact. Focus groups usually include a dual aspect: i) *A trained moderator who sets the stage with prepared questions or an interview guide* ii) *The goal of eliciting participants feeling, attitudes and perceptions about selected topic* (Puchta and Potter 2004, p.6). This is the final aspect on which the committee placed the focus on.

Processing the collected data

In research, the researcher withdraws once all data needed has been collected, and analyses the collected data according to specific methods. In this case, the whole intention was for the entire committee to process the collected data. This process has begun, as each participant has been asked to note which topics has been important to them individually. This will form the basis for further categorisation, which in turn will form the basis for further analyses or various ways of understanding the collected material from a theoretic perspective. The manner in which Ann and Liz cooperated in their conversation with the foster parents may, for instance, be discussed in the light of a theoretic perspective on tacid knowledge (Polany, 1966), or the manner in which they assumed roles, that led to reflections being exchanged between the two, may be discussed in the light of reflection processes (Andersen 1994). In this way the entire committee participates in interpreting and analysing their experiences.

Imparting new knowledge

In research, the researcher writes a report, thesis, or even, a book or article on his findings. Usually, findings are presented to the world of research, and might thus be less accessible to the fields of practice. The work presented in this essay, however, is intended to benefit the committee itself and the colleagues in the Child Welfare Services respectively, which in turn will result in an improved practice. In research, written communication dominates, but here the final results and conclusions will be implemented in the two Child Welfare Services, and will be imparted in various ways, through different processes. Currently, this is the committee's final challenge.

Conclusion

This essay has illustrated a reflection process which aims to acquire knowledge about cooperation processes between the municipal and the governmental Child Welfare Service. During this process we have benefited from qualitative research competence which has been included in the work of the committee in view of researching a problem area and generating new knowledge. The example provided in this essay also illustrates how research competence may be employed directly on the reflection and development of child welfare practice, and how the collaboration between The AUC and the child welfare workers contributed to this.

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