Action Research Within the Tradition of Nordic Countries

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28.1 Introduction

The promise and challenge of action research is embedded in the double-edged concept itself: "action" referring to striving for improvement and change and "research" suggesting certain kinds of principles and practices for enhancing and enabling change. As Somekh and Zeichner (2009, p. 5) note, the collision of terms emanates discursive power. In our interpretation, action research is first and foremost to be understood as a "both-and" concept, combining political aspirations with methodological ambitions. In this chapter, we dig deeper into this discursive collision and the potentials of the both-and character. We search for inspiration and understanding in the history of our educational traditions in order to reflect on the concepts and practices in use today. Within the field of education, we look at Nordic ways of conducting action research as a historical, political, and cultural amalgamation of Continental (German) pedagogy, the ideals and aims of the French revolution, and the methods of Anglo-American popular education.

As a result of the struggle fought across social movements in the early twentieth century, educational ideals encompassing generality, comprehensiveness, and inclusiveness were realized in all Nordic countries from the 1960s to the 1990s. Learning practices embrace the personal, the political, and the professional dimensions (Noffke, 1997) of growing as a human being, becoming an active citizen, and developing as an engaged worker. The overall approach to education is a holistic one. It aims to relate the personal to the political, and

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the political to the professional, and thereby to handle the complexities and interconnectedness of the assumptions, purposes, and practices also characteristic of the vast field of action research (Laginder, Nordvall, & Crowther, 2012; Rinne, Heikkinen, & Salo, 2007).

Action research as an explicit concept and identifiable practice was not much used in Nordic countries until the 1960s. It first appeared in conjunction with research and development in social work and working life science and development. Norwegian action research pioneers Max Elden and Morten Levin (1991) developed the Scandinavian model of Participatory Action Research, and Bjørn Gustavsen (1985) emphasized the importance of dialogue in increasing democracy, equality, and social justice in working life, in the midst of an industrial transition. In Sweden, research circles were developed in the late 1970s (Nilsson, 1990). These built on collaboration between unions and universities to democratize knowledge production and to bridge theoretical understanding with practical challenges in the labour market and working life organizations. Action research in education appeared in the 1990s when responsibility for professional development was turned over to individual schools and local municipal authorities. Action research was established in the context of local school development (Johnson, 2006) as a bottom-up practice, to enable practitioners to widen their scope for professional action (Berg, 2007, p. 594). Teachers were to act as reflective practitioners, and school development was to become research-based (Rönnerman, 1996). Such ambitions called for the collaboration and partnerships, between universities and schools, researchers and teachers, constituting the essence of action research.

Nordic action research is characterized by its strong emphasis on collaboration. In the field of education, this collaborative aspect is emphasized in two complementary manners (Rönnerman & Salo, 2012). Firstly, researchers, teachers, and other educationalists work in groups. This reflects the tradition of collaborative knowledge production within study circles. Secondly, researchers are usually connected to educational settings as facilitators. The drive is towards dissolving the dichotomy between theory and practice, and thereby the division of knowledge forms characteristic of academia and school. Different practices, and the views of knowledge embedded therein, challenge each other in order to reveal the very character of the practice that is to be researched. Our definition of educational action research reads as follows:

A reciprocal challenging of professional knowledge and experiences, rooted in everyday practices within schools, in collaborative arenas populated by researchers and practitioners, and in the interchange of knowledge of different kinds. (Rönnerman, Salo, & Furu, 2008b, p. 277)

A historical introduction lays the groundwork for discussion of the central concepts and ideals in the Nordic tradition of action research. We present the historical and theoretical underpinnings of folk enlightenment, which are still strongly alive (e.g. Burman, 2014; Siljander, Kivinen, & Sutinen, 2012) but in need of revitalization in the present times of neo-liberal policies (Hardy, Rönnerman, & Salo, 2015). After this follows a section describing the forms and arenas for collaborative meetings in action research, and, finally, we discuss action research in terms of professional learning and development, with teachers/principals and researchers acting as equal partners in site-based educational development. This chapter is anchored in the collaborative intellectual work and action research conducted within a Nordic Network in Action Research (NNAR) (2015), established in 2004 among researchers from Sweden, Norway, and Finland with the aim to study, develop, promote, and nurture action research.

28.2 FOLK ENLIGHTENMENT: A NORDIC PROGRAMME OF HUMAN GROWTH

The self-image of folk enlightenment contextualizes human growth and learning within a trinity of people, democracy, and nation, assuming that "democratic spirit can be a fundamental feature of a certain" group of people, an identifiable folk (Dahlstedt & Nordvall, 2011, p. 248). The concept of "folk" has been used to refer to a community brought and kept together by a sense of a common cause, which may be social, cultural, or political (Korsgaard, 2002). In the late nineteenth century, folk enlightenment could refer to the education of a certain social group, for example, farmers, immigrants, or women, or a group having a certain position in society such as the underprivileged or the marginalized. In the framework of ongoing construction of national unity and identity, folk enlightenment was to awaken and strengthen a sense of shared culture, language, history, traditions, and mentality. "Folk" was also interpreted and used as a political concept. The aim of folk enlightenment was to empower people to bring about change and democracy and to support the development and functioning of a civil society.

From a general point of view, folk enlightenment strove to anchor the complex processes of individual human growth to the cultural, social, and political development of a community, characterized by a common cause and identity. In everyday life, human growth is to be furthered in a collective manner, by experiential knowledge expressed, discussed, interpreted, and refined through interaction and dialogue between equals (Korsgaard, 2000). Collective human growth, in addition to its impact on everyday lives, is also embedded in various public spheres and professional forums for collective and collaborative meaning-making and dialogical knowledge construction.

Even if the use of concepts vary between the Nordic countries (the term "folk enlightenment" is used in Norway and Denmark, "folkbildung" in Sweden and "folk civilization" in Finland), all national traditions relate to the concept and ideal of bildung (human development, in Swedish bildning), as was formed in late eighteenth century within German pedagogy. According to this historical conception, human beings grow and become more humane by a practical coping and interaction within the world. Human formation was

no longer understood as being determined by nature or religion, but rather it was realized in the practices human beings were involved in, as an interplay between self-formation and the world. Bildung is characterized by openness, endlessness, and independence. Accordingly, it is not possible to determine any definite aims for human development. Becoming more human is about striving for freedom from cultural, social, and political determinations and constraints (Masschelein & Ricken, 2003, p. 140).

As an ambitious and comprehensive but highly ambiguous conceptualization, bildung has been open to various (historical) interpretations. It still carries an elitist connotation of referring to classic "liberal education," by which capable individuals realize a "timeless" cultivated personality and identity (Løvlie & Standish, 2002). But in the context of the Nordic countries, when used and mobilized in the societal and political upheaval of the late nineteenth century, it was understood in its social configuration, dependent on being able to combine individuality and sociality. Thereby bildung, especially in our Nordic countries' point of view, is still to be understood as "social transformation through the formation of individuals" (Masschelein & Ricken, 2003, p. 140). As Horlacher (2004, p. 410) notes, despite the fact that bildung carries a "remarkable ambivalence of ambiguity versus splendour," as an educational ideal, it still enjoys great popularity among both German and Nordic school theorists and educational policymakers. "Bildung has high demands and expectations; Bildung contains a promise of salvation, and Bildung cannot be reduced to mechanics, and certainly not to economics. Bildung is the haven for 'Good' and 'Whole.'" (p. 410)

Bildung is also characterized by the same both-andness that we ascribe to action research. According to Gustavsson (1996), bildung refers simultaneously to a free, endless, lifelong process of becoming more human, and to societally formed aims such as active citizenship or skilful leadership. Within the teaching profession, this dynamic is elucidated by emphasizing the difference between the never-ending process of becoming (more) of a teacher and the state of being a skilful teacher. Bildung relates both to integration and specialization. It represents an ambition to gain knowledge and insights, not merely for external professional development but for inner human growth. As an integrative process, bildung challenges the specialization and division characteristic of both science (theory) and professional knowledge (practice). It also represents a belief in the equality of all human beings. Bildung stands for enhancing solidarity and integration in work life organizations and labour markets characterized by division and fragmentation.

From a hermeneutic perspective, Bildung aims to bridge the known with the unknown. Teachers' engagement in action research opens up confrontations with unfamiliar practices, brings them closer to reflecting about themselves as professionals, and empowers them to construct and make use of alternative interpretations. Respectful and tolerant interaction and dialogue, characteristic to folk enlightenment practices, make particular interpretations available for further interpretations, opening them up to more universal interpretations (Gustavsson, 2014, p. 200). From a societal point of view, Bildung represents an ideal of autonomous and critical citizens capable of self-reflection and self-determination. In the Nordic countries, the idea of educated citizens capable of furthering the interests of collectives has been used to define the manner in which education ought to relate to the development of society. The act and process of being a social human being is related to the development of the capabilities and skills needed in society and the workplace. In this context, bildung can be defined as:

the historical development processes of both individuals and societies in which people systematically strive towards developing themselves and their sociocultural environment into something 'more humane,' 'more enhanced' and 'more developed.' (Siljander, 2007, p. 71)

Consequently, bildung coincides with action research, when understood as furthering democratic practices and nurturing social justice. Action research as "a methodology grounded in the values and culture of its participantresearchers" (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009, p. 6), and in its sensitivity to local agency, reflects a genuine confidence in human beings. It stands for rightful professionals, able to act in a morally committed manner and being oriented both by the traditions of the profession and by the social-political and materialeconomic conditions characteristic of the society at hand (Kemmis & Smith, 2008, p. 4).

28.3 Arenas and Forums for Collaborative KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

In the following, we will exemplify how the complex ideals of bildung are put into practice in the Nordic countries. In our view, action research within education has to do with professional learning and development in and through collaborative knowledge production in study and research circles or dialogue conferences.

28.3.1 Study Circles

The Swedish National Encyclopaedia gives this definition of study circles.

Study circle—a group of people who meet regularly and devote themselves to studies or cultural activities. ... Distinctive for these [study circles] was learning from the free conversation that compensated for the traditional taught lesson (NE, 1995, p. 365, authors' translation)

This practice is familiar in education and action research. The study circle was an important alternative to traditional school-based learning for people in Sweden and other Nordic countries at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Citizens met in small groups at the workplace to read and discuss literature. Alongside industrialism, people needed education to become part of society as democratic citizens. Folk enlightenment, and subsequently adult education, was foregrounded by values such as democracy, dialogue, and sharing knowledge. It was Oscar Olsson in Sweden who shaped the idea of learning in groups as a way of protecting the participants' knowledge and experiences and who initiated the study circle at the beginning of the twentieth century (Larsson & Nordvall, 2010). At the centre, he put "the book"—to be read, discussed, and related to the participants' own experiences. Ellen Key (author of *The Century* of the Child, 2013) supported the idea of study circles as a way of enhancing bildung, growing as human beings. She emphasized the dialogue and that education begins with the human being whose issues can be scrutinized and further explored—a view also recognized in action research.

Study circles were of great importance in building a social democracy through interactive projects. A study circle can be viewed as a way to achieve individual learning alongside democratic processes for collective knowledge construction and enhancing social changes—features which also describe critical action research (Rönnerman & Salo, 2012). Through both action research and study circles, practitioners develop deeper understandings of practices and the conditions under which practice takes place (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 164). The study circle has since become an important approach to nonformal adult education.

In action research, meeting in small groups to reflect, discuss, and share knowledge, facilitated by a researcher, is a common ingredient. Our longlasting ambition has been not only to ground action research in the tradition of Nordic folk enlightenment but also to study how it was developed through work life science in Norway and Sweden before it became part of the education system in the late 1990s. In the Nordic countries, the development of action research was strongly influenced by the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Forums for sharing and constructing knowledge among practitioners in small groups are also characteristic of Engeström's activity theory (2004) as developed and understood in Finland.

In Englund's (2000, p. 6) view, study circles function as "deliberative conversations," allowing space for different views and arguments and emphasizing tolerance, respect, and the need to listen to others. This approach can also be connected to Gustavsen (2001), who in the 1970s established action research in the field of work life science focusing on developing small companies in which the democratic dialogue was essential.

Action research projects were established on a large scale and in collaboration between researchers in Sweden and Norway by focusing on the participants' contribution of knowledge. Different methods for this were developed from the 1970s and onwards, such as the research circle and the dialogue conference. Both can be traced back to the study circle as an arena established within the folk enlightenment in the Nordic countries with the purpose of sharing knowledge collaboratively—not as scientific knowledge imposed from the

outside but rather as a development from the inside. Looking back, hundred years ago, the challenge was to educate people to become democratic citizens. This is highly relevant in times such as ours. We will continue to explore how this challenge is part of educational action research, with its purpose of educating new generations and at the same time nurturing the teaching profession to become professional activists in collaboration with researchers (Rönnerman, Furu, & Salo, 2008).

28.3.2 Research Circles

The research circle is a well-recognized concept that has been developed in education since the 1990s as a way of creating partnerships between researchers and practitioners and between academia and schools in terms of site-based educational development. A research circle includes a researcher as an equal part of the knowledge building process. Holmer (1993, p. 150) emphasizes research circles as sites in which participants gain knowledge, develop knowledge, and participate in the social production of knowledge. In education, particularly in pre-schools, Rönnerman and Olin (2014) add another aspect to research circles: learning to lead the production of knowledge. This was done after the two researchers invited two groups of teachers to take part in a research circle that corresponded with the Swedish Education Act of 2011 (SFS, 2010: 800), which emphasizes that education in both pre-school and school should be built on a scientific base and on proven experience. The groups consisted of ten teachers plus a researcher with the main focus to establish a meeting between the scientific field, with relevant research and theory, and participants' own experience of acting as facilitators for colleagues. Each meeting lasted four hours and was structured in the same way but with different jointly decided topics all referring to the specific task of being a peer-facilitator for quality work in pre-schools. Each topic started with a discussion about being a leader followed by how to analyse data and develop professional learning communities and, finally, how to create necessary conditions for learning as a leader. Each meeting consisted of discussions of research literature and shared presentations of the teachers' work in their practice, both connected to the chosen topic. Research circles are understood as collective sites in which it is essential to understand practice in such a way as to be able to work to improve with colleagues.

Building on the tradition of study circles as used in folk enlightenment, research circles were established at Lund University in Sweden in the 1970s when the labour unions became interested in collaborative knowledge production with universities during the major crisis of shipbuilding and car industries (Holmer, 1993). A research circle builds on reciprocity, and the first circles started as courses for union leaders as part of organizing and developing knowledge exchange between researchers and unions (Nilsson, 1990). Since then, research circles have been used in various ways, mainly within work life sciences and social work, with the purpose of collaboration between parties in a democratic way, where different perspectives or understandings of a specific issue are in focus.

In educational contexts, research circles were not introduced until the beginning of this century (Holmstrand & Härnsten, 2003) and have since been used in various ways for participatory research. An illustrative example is presented by Enö (2005), who describes the daily experience of the use of research circles to create a space for reflective dialogue within the teaching profession. Her thesis is based on twenty-seven monthly evening meetings with eleven early childhood teachers. Her study shows how the project revealed not only a clear potential for change and emancipation but also the importance of hope and meaning-making. In a thesis by Wingård (1998), the research circle is used as a way of understanding the specific situation of being a female principal. Eight principals met the researcher one evening a month for two years, discussing and analysing issues relating to their experiences of being principals. In this instance, the findings included valuable indications that, rather than focusing on school development, the principals tended to prioritize administrative tasks and personal relations issues. In both these examples, the researcher met the participants during evenings, and the research circles developed into important arenas for collaborative discussions with a focus on questions relevant to the participants' daily work.

A research circle is not a uniform concept, but can somewhat generally be described as a meeting in which participants conduct a co-operative search for, and development of, knowledge. As such, a research circle always originates in a problem which has been jointly decided upon and which is intended to be scrutinized from all sides. The intention is not to solve the problem but to analyse it and thereby to widen participants' knowledge of it.

Although ways of dealing with the identified problems differ between situations, Holmstrand and Härnsten (2003, p. 21) point out that, in all research circles, the participants' knowledge and experiences, the researchers' knowledge about the identified problem, and the researchers' competence as researchers (systematic knowledge) are all of importance when handling the problem. In some circumstances, the actions within a research circle are followed up and documented and become public (Rönnerman, Salo, et al., 2008, pp. 26–29). This has been done systematically in the long-lasting partnerships between the city of Malmö and Malmö University College, where research circles have been used since 2006 for collaboration between groups of teachers and researchers for school development (Malmö Stad, 2012). Such collaborations not only emphasize the format of regular meetings over a period of time (at least 1.5 years) to enable knowledge building and network building but also challenge the model to be developed further.

In the Nordic countries, the most common approach to educational action research involves a model in which teachers meet regularly in groups, emphasizing a democratic dialogue around the inquiry to be investigated and facilitated by a researcher (Rönnerman, Furu, et al., 2008). Today, research circles gather participants in small groups, focusing on a specific joint issue and

scrutinizing it carefully, with the purpose of developing a better understanding of the problem, in order to develop readiness for action-in-practice.

28.3.3 Dialogue Conferences

Dialogue conferences were developed in the 1970s within work life science. They were based on workers' increased influence on working conditions and intended to be a way of working towards a better working life. One focus was on the significance of small groups acting for democracy. Another was on working groups and their dynamic influences on organizations. Today, dialogue conferences are used in education as a democratic way to discuss and share different views on a specific issue. Gustavsen (2001) refers to democratic dialogue as the most important feature in working towards change in organizations. He is against implementing theory-driven approaches as they place strong restrictions on the participation of the actors. Instead, he suggests a mediating discourse, which links discourse on theory and discourse on practice. He argues for linking theory and practice by putting the dialogue in the foreground. By emphasizing the dialogue, the procedures for how to deal with an issue become more important than the content itself. For this to happen, Gustavsen defines a number of criteria for democratic dialogues (pp. 18–19):

- Participants have the same status, are to help each other to be active in the dialogue and to understand the topics at hand, use their work experiences as a point of departure, and understand them as relevant for the dialogue.
- Dialogue is based on a principle of two-way communication, aims at integrating a growing degree of disagreement, and should continuously generate decisions that provide a platform for joint action.
- The arguments brought forward in the dialogue must be represented by a participant, are to be scrutinized and handled deliberatively, and can be rejected only after a collective investigation.

These are criteria which at first seem obvious, but experiences of facilitating groups of teachers reveal that they are hard to fulfil. Gustavsen emphasizes therefore the need for structures for building relationships as the criteria suggests. To establish democratic discussions and communication between all parties (Gustavsen, 2001; Kalleberg, 1993), the dialogue conference has to be organized in a specific way, with participants divided into different groups over a day. All voices have to be part of a democratic discussion about organizational change and development. In Gustavsen's research (Gustavsen, 1985, 2001; Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986), involving about 1,000 small businesses, the dialogue conference was essential in letting employees meet both in homogeneous (same staff category) and heterogeneous (mixed staff categories) groups. In this approach, relationship building was at the fore. All voices, from the caretaker to the director, were included in a democratization of the workplace. At the same time, the researchers, as partners, could study the foundations for changing working life.

In Norway, dialogue conferences have lately been used in education as a way of dealing with reforms in schools. A typical dialogue conference in education (Lund, 2008) is organized for all staff (principal, teachers, assistants, etc.) from one or several schools during one day around a chosen theme (e.g. collegial learning or assessment for learning). The day is divided into four sections: (a) theoretical input on the actual theme, from an invited researcher, (b) discussions in professional groups (e.g. all teachers, principals, middle leaders) about their experiences relating to the lecture, (c) discussions in mixed groups, sharing knowledge and experiences around the topic, and (d) presenting a practical example from a professional teacher team. The basic idea is that all participants in a school can contribute to a given topic. Furu and Lund (2014) report on dialogue conferences relating to how to change teaching by including teachers in dialogues about formative assessment. The dialogue conference is also used in some parts of Sweden, for example, when 150 teachers, development leaders, and principals met to focus on how to continue with action research within schools. In a final discussion, participants were placed with peers from their own workplace and given tasks for further work in their school based on what they had heard during the day. Dialogue conferences have also been used in an action research master's programme to share experiences between teachers from schools in Sweden and in Norway. This form of working has been picked up by practitioners to organize district discussions. Furthermore, the network itself organizes the annual two-days conferences as a dialogue conferences where researchers, teachers, and leaders meet to share both research and experiences.

28.4 ACTION RESEARCH AS COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL Learning and Development in Education

The understanding and use of action research, with its roots in a tradition of folk enlightenment (bildung) and in the practices of study and research circles and dialogue conferences, has been elaborated collaboratively and collectively for a decade by the NNAR. The NNAR was formed in 2004 by researchers and practitioners in Sweden, Norway, and Finland (NNAR, 2015) and has since been engaged in action research and professional development within education. An important ingredient in this collaboration has been the ambition to form a common orientation towards the multiplicity and complexity of action research traditions and practices. Doing this has developed a deeper understanding of our own educational tradition and, especially, the manner in which action research is conceptualized and practiced.

We have found that collaborations and partnerships between researchers and teachers are far from rare. The institutional distance between universities and schools, especially since the realization of social democracy processes in the 1960s, has been reduced. Folk universities (within Swedish adult education) and folk high schools (in all Nordic countries) have, since their establishment,

in the late 1900s, fought and stood for accessibility and participation in higher education. The development of research circles began as a way of enhancing collaboration on a basis of equality and with the purpose of enabling professional learning and development for both practitioners and researchers. Since the decentralization of educational development from the beginning of the 1990s, universities in the Nordic countries have had a central role in professional development within education, involving teachers and researchers as equal partners. In many cases, this has been achieved using a model of collaborative action research

In a book published by the NNAR in 2008 (Rönnerman, Furu, et al., 2008a), a number of cases, focusing on action research in terms of partnerships between universities and schools, are presented. Many of the professional development projects reported had been going on for ten years or more. Our own learning and professional development within the network is recognized in a book edited by Rönnerman and Salo (2014). In it, we elaborate action research in terms of organization theory, and especially translation theory, with the aim of bringing organization theory closer to practice,—in our case, anchoring professional development in schools (Lund & Furu, 2014). Members of our network (Eilertsen & Jakhelln, 2014) elaborate a Norwegian conceptualization of pedagogy, called the practical knowledge regime, with the aim of promoting the notion of teachers' autonomy and development as an integral part of their professional practice. Development of this practical knowledge regime by Norwegian educational researchers Lars Løvlie and Erland Dale provided

a shift from pedagogy, as a scientific, epistemic and fragmented endeavour, to practice and praxis as the point of departure for pedagogical and educational knowledge building. This also implied a shift from a definition of teachers as obedient consumers of academically generated knowledge, to autonomous learning professionals integrating science-based results, experience-based knowledge and normative considerations into their everyday practice. (Eilertsen & Jakhelln, **2014**, p. 27)

To a certain extent, understanding of the aims and function of education in Nordic countries has been pragmatic, both from an individual and a societal point of view. This also applies to educational action research. It is historically and socially based on a humanistic conception and construction of the potentials of human beings and a strong political consciousness of and a striving for maintaining a well-functioning civil society. The inclusiveness and generality of the democratic state ideology, combined with this pragmatic orientation towards the challenges at hand, results in a weakness. As action researchers in Nordic countries, acting within a particular national ideology and history, we do not seem to (or have to?) explicitly address the differences in the status, roles, and aims of practitioners (teachers) and researchers in the same manner as action researchers do in other historical and political contexts (Kemmis, 2014). This does not mean that we overlook the politics of practice or the politics of action research (Stevenson, 2014). Our comprehension of the roles and status of practitioners/teachers versus researchers, and the politics of professional development through action research, is embedded in a historically formed trust in the potential for human edification regardless of race, gender, or social class. This may be somewhat naive, but it is not uninformed. It coincides with our interpretation of the (originally German) concept and ideal of bildung (human formation). For us, bildung stands for a confidence in, recognition of, and reliance on human beings to be able to realize their potentials collaboratively, in an orderly and sustainable manner, within and in relation to a culture, history, and tradition. In times of globalized competition and uncertainty, triggered by neo-liberalism, standardization, and accountability, we aim to understand and mobilize bildung as a counter-ideology (Horlacher, 2012). The same applies to our understanding of collaborative action research. It builds on and aims for human flourishing in participatory and democratic practices. It is anchored in practical issues, and it celebrates knowledge-inaction (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, pp. 1–2).

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