Action research as an approach to professional and organizational development in teacher education

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Abstract
Evaluations show that student teachers often experience a gap between the knowledge presented in teacher education, and the knowledge needed for handling complex teaching situations (NOKUT, 2006). On this background a group of teacher educators in a Norwegian University carried out an action research project over a period of five years (2005 – 2010) (Gjøtterud, 2011). The aim of the project was to bridge the gap by improving our (as educators’) guiding skills. Writing assignments is a core task in the student teachers’ learning process, thus guiding writing processes is important. Enhancing our guiding practice was chosen in order to improve the study program. The methodology adopted and developed was an interplay of first-person inquiries embedded in Living Theory (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006), and Co-operative inquiry inspired by Heron and Reason (2001; 2008). This paper seeks to explore the question of how action research may be used as an approach for developing teacher education.

Key words: Living Theory, Co-operative action research, teacher education, professional development, guiding, organizational development

Introduction
Evaluations has showed a considerable problem with relevance in Norwegian teacher education where student teachers do not experience a satisfactory connection between theory taught and current problems they meet in the schools (NOKUT, 2006). On this background there was a drive for improving our practice. Since guiding the students’ written assignments was and still is one core task for the teacher educators, our guiding practice was chosen as the main focus of the study. The written assignments are seen as important in the students’ competence building. The aim is that the assignments shall bridge the gap between practice and theory. In the assignment chosen as focus in the study the students described a real teaching situation; how it was planned and carried out, and they reflected upon their experience in the classroom drawing on relevant
pedagogical theory. The assumption was that if our guiding competence, and awareness towards the students’ potential, was raised, the quality of the education could be improved.

The main question of the research was how teacher educators can improve their individual and collective practice; and how such research may contribute to a more relevant and better founded teacher education. In this article we attempt to show how the research project was carried out and what was accomplished. First we address the question of what the premises were in the actual context that made such a collective effort, over so long a period, possible. Because we emphasize the process – how the research was carried out, we elaborate the methodology rather thoroughly. Then we more briefly outline the theories underpinning our practice. Then follow three lines of results. First, we look at how the guiding practice was changed and continued to change after the project. Secondly, we emphasize the impact the project had in the working environment. Thirdly, we analyze how the project influenced the group’s ability for doing action research. All these we claim are factors contributing to organizational changes. The unit of the department for teacher education is here defined as the organization.

The two authors of this article are Sigrid who initiated and conducted the action research project, as her PhD-research, and Erling who participated actively in the project and also was one of Sigrid’s supervisors. All names, except our own, are altered for anonymity.

**Context of the study**
Teacher education has had a long history in our University, but at the beginning of the 1990s it was temporarily ended. The program was re-established in 1999. The first year there were 24 student teachers, today there are about 130 student teachers in the post graduate program. The organization has grown rapidly over a period of ten years. At the beginning we were a small group of teacher educators planning, teaching and developing the program together. We built a collaborative environment where everyone knew what the others were doing in their lessons. The research was also mainly tied to development of the pedagogic content of the teaching. But with increased demands for administrative work, larger student groups and raised expectations of research publication, the working environment changed, as well as the teaching:

At first it was science then biology, physics, math and chemistry – our foci became more and more specialized. As time went we were engaged in a number of enterprises. That meant distribution of tasks in an ever changing workday. (...) It is a situation where you are like a squash-player, and you try to always hit the hardest ball! (Erling, research-meeting October 2007)

It was within such an atmosphere, where the staff was used to collaborating and learning together, and at the same time experiencing rapid changes and more fragmented working relationships, the
action research was welcomed as a unifying project. A space for in-depth dialogues and reflection was created in the midst of our hectic days, what Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) call a communicative space. The action research project filled a need for a co-creative process, where we could continue to develop and enhance the teacher education program we were responsible for.

A main quality of the teacher education program was characterized by close relationships between staff-members as well as between teachers and students. Since everyone had been involved in planning and teaching the curriculum, students often commented on the positive interplay that was experienced in the teaching. This was a quality we feared could be lost in the busy atmosphere - a quality we wanted to extend into the future even with increased demands. We also experienced that our different interests were appreciated. When a colleague asked if it was ok that she engaged in an African project while also being a teacher educator, the following answer was given by our head of department: “of course you have to work with something you find important (…)!” (Soundtrack, research-meeting June 2008) This kind of openness towards the various interests was characteristic. We state that the working environment was influenced by values of co-operation, respect for diversity and love for each other and the work we administered. We needed a methodology that could sustain and further develop our practice in accordance with these values. On this background an action research approach was chosen.

Methodology – a variety of influences
The project was inspired by four different action research approaches; although we must admit that this was not clear from the beginning. The leader of the project was the only member of the team that had practical experience of action research and limited theoretical knowledge. Therefore the theoretical foundation was slowly developed, and how well informed the members were at the end varied. Still the influence of pragmatic action research formed a base for the project. Pragmatic action research originates from the work of Elliott and Stenhouse – a British tradition of teachers as researchers (Elliott, 1991; Stenhouse, 1975). This approach encourages teachers, and thus teacher educators, to research their own practice in order to initiate improved practices, and further to create relevant knowledge for the educational field from practice. Secondly the project was inspired by critical action research which builds on Habermas’ critical theory (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; 2005). This direction emphasizes the emancipating potential of action research. Thirdly Living theory was an important well of inspiration. Living Theory is developed by Whitehead and McNiff who emphasizes that the individual teacher or teacher educator documents the development of his/her own practice and thereby create their own living theory (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). A living theory is defined as “an explanation produced by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning in the social formation in which they live and work” (Whitehead, 2008: 104). A main
point is that we need to express the values that we use to give meaning and purpose to our lives in education. The values may then be used as standards of judgment and hence to improve what we are doing in accordance with the values. Creating a living theory is usually done by the individual, but our fourth inspiration came from Co-operative action research as discussed by Heron and Reason (2001; 2008). This approach builds on a holistic participative worldview. Within such a frame researchers search to develop sustainable practices together. The co-operative values resonated well with the values in our group, and we made an attempt at creating a co-operative living theory. A co-operative living theory based on the grounding ideas from pragmatic and critical action research. A basic, systematic action research structure of plan-act-observe-reflect was followed (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

**Design of the guiding-project**

Heron and Reason (2001: 180) have described a four-phase strategy which formed a base for a five-phase strategy that we developed through our lived research practice.

In the *first phase* the researchers decide to explore an agreed area of activity, and form an initial research-plan. In our case Sigrid had decided the topic of the research and the initial plan was set by Sigrid and her supervisors (who were also part of the research process). The dilemmas that came out of this not so democratic approach will be discussed later. A three-year plan (2005 – 2008) for active engagement in action research cycles was agreed upon, after an initial inquiry phase. The work was organised around research-meetings; three to five half-day or full-day meetings each year for in-depth dialogues about our guiding practice.

In the *second phase* the co-researchers plan their actions. This is the phase where each guiding period was planned (individually). What aspects of each member’s guiding practice were to be explored and hopefully enhanced in the coming period of guiding? In order to limit the study we concentrated on one main assessment the students work on in their initial semester. The individual plans were shared in research-meetings.

Then in the third *phase* the researchers become immersed in their actions and experiences, in our case the guiding actions. Here we tried to carry out the plans for our individual improvements, and observe what we did and how this affected the students and their learning. In this phase the main question is “how can I improve my practice?” This is in line with the living theory approach.

The *fourth phase* is when the researchers reflect on their experiences and analyze them. This was done first individually and then the reflections were shared in the research-group. Thus we could learn from each others’ experiences. Each teacher educator’s practice became known to the others, each members’ practice could then be enriched by others ideas and experiences. In this phase the main question is “how can we improve our practice?” In this phase we also gradually learned to analyze
together. What had we learned from our experiences, and what consequences did that have for the next cycle of planning and acting? This kind of initial analyses we have called first order analyses. Phase two, three and four were repeated over the three-year period.

Then finally in the fifth phase an overall analysis of the whole process was conducted. This kind of analyses we have called second order analyses. In this phase there was an ongoing interplay between Sigrid’s analysing process, in dialogue with some of the group-members, and analysing meetings in the full group (2009 – 2010). The following figure illustrates the research-process:

Figure 1 Action research process of three cycles, after an initial phase, 1.order analyses between the cycles and 2.order analyses after completion of the planned cycles leading to theorizing the process and results. Pi = individual planning, Pm = mutual planning, Ri = individual reflection, Rm = mutual reflection

The research was a constant interplay between the individuals’ research into their own guiding practice and the groups’ research into our joint practice. In the second year of the study there was a shift towards paying closer attention to our action research practice as well as the guiding practice.

The methodology as described here is a result of the project as we adapted the strategy developed by Heron and Reason (2001) during the process and thus developed a five-phase model, and also the action research-model (figure 1).

Data sources were reflection notes (logs) from both teacher-educators and students, the students assignments, written guiding texts and evaluative feedback texts written by the teachers, and minutes from research-meetings (often sound tracked or video-filmed).
Winters’ (1989) six principles for conduct of action research (reflexive critique, dialectic critique, collaborative resource, plural structure, risk and theory-practice transformation) made up a basis for the living research process as well as the interpretation of data. This is sought shown by establishing the context for the inquiry, by questioning our practice and finding possibilities for change within these questions, and by showing how we have contributed to each others’ growth as teacher-educators. There is always a risk of not improving practice even if that is the intention. Theory-practice transformation lies in the way we have sought to theorize our lived experiences in a way that we believe can be of significance for other teacher-educators who want to develop their practice through co-operative action research.

Data was analyzed according to Eneroth’s (1984) methods of process analyses and dialectical analyses. Process analyses was conducted in order to identify characteristics of situations that showed changes in guiding practice (including organizational changes and changes in teaching) and research practice that had taken place over a period of time. The method of dialectic analyses was applied in order to identify what influence had caused the changes from one situation to the next – what had we learned from each other and what ideas had our discussions brought about.

**Theoretical frame**

Guiding and co-operative action research occur in encounters between people. Since some of the researchers in the group had Buber’s (1937) philosophy of the I-and-Thou encounter as a center of their practice, this philosophy became a main inspiration for the research. Love is *between I and Thou*, it is not a feeling, says Buber. “Love is responsibility of an I for a Thou. In this lies the likeness – impossible in any feeling whatsoever (...)” (Buber 1937: 20). Thus, we separate between love understood as an immediate emotional experience and empathic love characterized by consciously and directed sensitivity towards the situation and life world of The Other (Ciaramicoli & Ketcham, 2000; Levinas, 1996; Rogers, 1961/1995). A value for our practice is that the guiding is to be carried out in I-Thou relations. The values of love and empathy, together with the co-operative value are then standards our practice might be judged against (Whitehead, 2008).

Both guiding and professional development through action research, involve learning from experience in Dewey’s sense (1938). Experiential learning is bound to specific contexts, it involves being immersed in experiences (in interaction with surroundings and other people) and reflecting upon these experiences with others. Guiding-strategies emphasizing reflection-on-action has influenced Norwegian teacher education the last 30 years (Handal & Lauvås, 1999; Skagen, 2000). The purpose of the guiding is to help students to gain consciousness about their pedagogic choices and thus become empowered to teach in line with their own values, in
accordance with the values given in the official teaching policy and supported by research. The aim is for the students to become reflective practitioners as discussed in Schön (1983).

According to Vygotskij (Vygotskij, Kozulin, Bielenberg, & Roster, 2001) written language is a more advanced kind of speech than spoken language. The thought is developed when it is expressed in words, and written speech is more conscious than oral speech (p. 162). Writing makes the thoughts visible and may lead to in-depth learning (Dysthe, Hertzberg, & Hoel, 2010). Therefore written reflections are highly valued as a means of developing teacher qualifications. In a socio-cultural understanding we encourage the students to reflect together in small groups and to respond to each others’ written texts.

It is not possible to elaborate in depth the theories underpinning our practice, but these are some important aspects that constitute a base for what Argyris and Schön (1996) call an organization’s theory in use. An organization’s theory in use is the theory that is visible within the practice, opposed to espoused theory, which describe the ideals of the organization.

**Guiding for student teachers’ professional development**

An initial inquiry revealed that the students were happy with the guidance they received. But looking more closely; what they said they were happy about was not what we intended:

> [The guiding] was decisive in order for the assignment to be in line with the given guidelines and thus discussed in accordance with the curriculum (...) (Log, Berit, January 2005)

Put simply the guiding helped the students to deliver a reply to our demands rather than to help them build teacher-competency. This result fostered a wide range of discussions leading to changes in teaching, assessment guidelines and guiding. Stronger emphasis was put on teaching the students how to reflect on their experiences. We stressed that teaching should involve the learners actively, and gave more opportunities for training and discussing-lessons with this aim in sight. Various approaches were used to practice reflecting skills. We already used logs (reflecting notes) as a base for group discussions. The students were organized in online writing groups. Teaching about how the students could give each other feedback on written texts and oral statements by asking open questions, affirm statements and give discretionary feedback was strengthened and practiced in the groups. The teachers started to give their guiding into the online groups, not by e-mail as was previously the practice. This meant that the students could learn guiding skills by observing the teachers guiding and immediately use the insight in guiding peer students.
The guiding I received in the period of the writing of the assignment was very useful. Not only did it help me write a better text, but I felt it helped me to become a better supervisor for others. (Log, Tonje, January 2006)

He [the supervisor] commented that I had been responsive to guiding. I am very grateful for this feedback. From before I know how important that is when you are guiding. Often it is easy to say what should be done differently and not notice when changes are made. This I regard as a challenge in my role as a supervisor, and that is something I will engage actively in when I am to teach/guide. (Log, Lina, January 2007)

I want to develop my skills to give feedback to the pupils, because I have experienced that mirroring feedback increases my own reflection and thoughts. (Log, Jannike, January 2007)

We claim that we have enhanced our guiding competency mainly by practicing guiding and by model-learning, by observing Sigrid in action. (Gunn, Karianne, Mona, Sam and Siri, Pedagogical development assignment, March 2007)

The reflecting tradition in guiding student teachers has been critiqued because this approach may not make use of the teacher’s knowledge that might influence the students positively (Skagen, 2000). We claim that we became more aware how we could serve as models and meet this critique constructively. This insight was regarded by the researchers as an important step towards a more relevant teacher education.

The teacher-educators spent quite a bit of time writing an evaluative feedback when the assignments were finished. This was done by the supervisor and an internal evaluator. From the students’ logs we learned that most students appreciated the praise they were given, but many wanted to be challenged further:

The evaluative comments were fun reading and made me feel joy of mastery. But I feel that I would also like to hear what was not satisfactory. (Log, Ingrid, January 2008)

Because the logs were discussed in the research-meeting we could collectively respond to this wish, and we established an evaluation-practice that always included one or more challenges for further development.

Through our discussions we became aware of how important it is for the quality of the reflections that the description of the practical teaching situation is accurate. We realized the importance of connecting assignment guiding with guiding in practice. When we had ourselves been present in the teaching situation we could better assist the students in making clear descriptions and thereby
to point their reflections more sensibly. Not only could we more readily guide the reflections, we also gained a deeper sensitivity for the students’ intentions. This lead to more pointed comments challenging the students’ teacher roles. In this way we were better prepared to encounter the students in I-Though relations also when guiding their texts online. Following the research project, this connection between guiding in practical teaching situations in school and guiding the assignment has become and established practice.

The notions of love and critique were launched at the very start of the process, and these notions became a tool for discussing our guiding practice (Gjøtterud, 2009). We tried to analyze our guiding actions according to the stated value of meeting the students in I-Though relations in order to improve the relational quality of the guiding practice. One main discussion lead to substitute the notion of critique with the notion of resistance. Critique is often a distanced analysis of situations and texts on the base of transferable (general) criteria. The reasoning for the chosen criteria, and the values and intellectual grounding for these criteria, is usually in accordance with the scientific convention. Unfortunately this grounding is often implicit and unconscious in practice. An empathic and conscious I-Though relation corresponds more precisely in the relational and more non-aligned notion resistance. Reflexive resistance takes its point of departure in the situation and opens up to a conscious choice of criteria that are derived from the demand in the situation.

For three years, following the initial inquiry, new students answered almost identical questions as in the initial inquiry. Hardly any students expressed that they had learned (only) how to write the assignment any more, but rather expressed what teacher competency they had acquired. Many wrote that they had learned how to plan their teaching. Others wrote that they had learned the value of setting clear learning aims for their teaching and the learners learning. Two students wrote:

This assignment has given me better insight about my appearance as leader of the class. This is very useful because I can use that to improve my teacher-role (Log, Aina, January 2008).

What I have become most aware of by working on this assignment is the pupils learning. I realize that I have been most concerned about my own teaching and have had too little emphasis on the pupils learning. Therefore I wish to focus more on the pupils learning and how I can evaluate their learning. (Log, Berit, January 2008)

Being concerned with the pupils learning seems to be a core competency for teachers. We regarded these statements as evidence that we indeed were improving our practice. Further we recognized that the assignment, having an important role in binding together practice and theory,
had become more relevant in the student teachers education. The students also expressed that they experienced interplay between what was going on in their school-practice and what was going on in the teaching at the university:

Reading the theory without practical background was of little use to me. I have experienced that the theory needs practice in order to fulfill the theory, and practice needs theory in order to verbalize the reality. This writing-process has raised my awareness of the motives behind my actions and choices. (…) This realization I can transfer to my pupils (…) (Log, Ellen, January 2007)

This student shows how her awareness of her underlying explanations for her practice was made conscious, and how she was able to transfer her own experiences to the work with her pupils.

By bringing our individual observations and reflections from our guiding practice into the research-group we learned from each other and we learned together. Korthagen (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999) accentuate that there has been made attempts at closing the gap between theory and practice in teacher education, but claims that such attempts “are often realized by a few isolated educators within an institute and are frequently criticized heavily by their colleagues” (p.6). The strength of our study is that this was not done by educators individually but rather in the full team. Therefore the results were entrenched in the organization and were likely to be lasting and continuing after the project.

**Strengthened bonds between teacher-educators deepening their professional knowledge**

As we pointed to earlier there was a need for a unifying project, a place and time for mutual focus on our daily activity as teacher educators. In the research-meetings there were many expressions of how the project had this effect on the teaching team. Firstly we did see each other, and each others’ qualities, more clearly:

It has been a joy, that we see each other and get the feeling we are lifting something together. (Lynn, research-meeting, November 2008)

An action research approach provides a strategy of collaborative research where relational insight is viewed as important research knowledge. Heron and Reason (2008) call this experiential knowing:

Experiential knowing is by being present (…). It is knowing through the immediacy of perceiving, through resonance. Its product is the quality of the relationship (…) (p. 367).
Through the collaborative process of research the members may develop a raised awareness and increased relational skills. Increased awareness of the relationships between us could also be a key to improved guiding relationships with the student teachers. That was one of the aims.

Secondly each colleague could mirror his/her experiences in the others’ guiding experiences and stories:

Suddenly I see things I do myself – in this meeting! (...) There is a self-reflective process here and now that creates inspiring ideas! (...) We start from an experience we have in encounter with a student and we try to learn from that experience. This is a general expression of our fundamental view – that we learn through experience. (Erling, research-meeting, November 2006)

Experiences were mainly shared in roundtable sessions. Each member had prepared a reflection note or story from one of his/her recent guiding sessions or periods. Stories were commented or discussed, and sometimes new ideas were created as shown in Erling’s statement above. There was an experience of co-creativity:

At the very heart of inclusionality is an awareness of exceptionality and how by pooling exceptionalities together we make exceptional teams and communities, capable of highly innovative solutions to problems through our co-creative agreement to differ. (Alan Rayner)

We did agree to differ, but there were also differences that were not spelled out, or dealt with in constructive ways. We did not fully investigate the differing potential. Still, new colleagues joining the team brought new views into the group and they also learned the guiding-culture of the group. One new colleague stated that the project had made her guiding conscious, it had been “almost a must in order to get into the guiding” (Research-meeting, August 2007). By sharing experiences we learned strategies from each other. For instance Sigrid learned from Erling how to deal with students who were not used to writing. Instead of posing several guiding questions, Erling would show the students how to write the text. He would help them start the writing process by giving them examples of what they were expected to write. From another colleague both Sigrid and Erling became more aware of how we dealt with various didactic aspects in the guiding. For instance, is it important that the students articulate precise aims for the pupils' learning? Questions like this affected not only the guiding regarding the assignments, but also the teaching preparing the students for their teaching.

The research-meetings became a resource for our mutual professional development:
What I regard important is that we work with professional knowledge. We talk about school and learners and about teacher education. There is not often time and room for this kind of discussion. We research teacher education (...) (Harald, research-meeting, November 2008)

It was emphasized that the research-process provided opportunities for deepening, contextualized, change oriented self-reflection. Further it was stated that the project had become like “glue” in the fragmented everyday-life where there was no longer time for sitting in on each others’ lessons, and other meetings increasingly had taken on an administrative form.

When analyzing the process at the end of the three year-cycles we concluded that the action research project had had the following characteristics:

- A place for seeing each other. “It has been a room where it has been possible to connect with persons and tasks in delight and enthusiasm, a place to share visions.” (Erling, June 2008). Another colleague described the project as a home, as a base for experimenting.

- Systematic professional immersion into core activities in teacher education. “Guiding is in everything that we do. So the fact that this has been a common project has been extremely necessary and a joy” (Agnes, research-meeting, June 2008). There had been pointed dialogues of analytical quality. It was also emphasized that theoretical aspects were drawn into the discussions and reflections.

- Integration of new members of staff. New employees expressed that this was a valuable way of learning the guiding-culture of the workplace, and it was also an arena where they could influence the culture and bring in new perspectives.

The project functioned as room for social learning, where we had learned from reflecting upon our own guiding experiences, listening to others experiences and learning, and by co-guiding. We did read each others’ written guiding texts and the evaluations of the students’ work. Also some of us had received guidance ourselves. Partly we had guided each other and partly Sigrid as a PhD-student had been guided. This was all experiential learning resulting in increased professional guiding knowledge. Knowledge that influenced the organization we were all parts of.

The final analysis of the research process brought forth six criteria for research conversations, in order to serve as a base for professional development:

- Development of strategies for the conversations in the group. We found that the meetings needed a structure, not a fixed structure but one that was continuously discussed, changed and agreed upon. This required:
- **Meta-conversations** about how the discussion functioned in relation to the intentions, with emphasis on listening skills.

- **The conversations take their point of departure in experience which is written.** We found that the conversations and discussions were more pointed when the material brought in for discussion was cultivated beforehand. Individual analyses formed the base for the mutual discussions.

- **Relevant theory comes into the reflections.** The discussions were deepened when arguments were anchored in relevant, established theory in the discourse.

- **Difference is recognized as recourse for co-creativeness.** Differences bear a creative potential.

- **A mutual conclusion of the results of the conversation and possible consequences.** We always concluded the meetings by analyzing what we had learned and what consequences this learning should lead to. We believe the progress of the work would have benefited from such a strategy.

**A common research base**

The research into our guiding activity increased our consciousness and ability of self-reflection and mutual reflection. This reflexive attitude and deepening was a drive to pay more close attention not only to our guiding practice, but also to our research practice in general and specifically towards co-operative action research. In the second and third year of the study many discussions dealt with questions regarding our action research practice. Only Sigrid had action research experience when the project started. At the end it was stated that “action research has become a common feature in our way of doing research in the section” (Erving and Astrid, reflection-note, December 2009). Action research had become a frame of research within the department. Getting there was not a straight forward process; at the beginning several members did not see themselves as co-researchers. We will analyze some reasons why this was the case and look at processes leading to the above statement.

During the first and second year of the inquiry members expressed that they were part of a developmental work, they were not doing research:

> I am not going to be a researcher in the project (writing articles etc.), but I wish to participate by sharing thoughts and reflections regarding my guiding. (…) I feel that taking part in the project is a great way for me to get to know action research. (Benedicte, reflection-note, August 2007)

> I have participated in the developmental work by improving the assignment guiding (…). I have written logs from my guiding practice that has contributed to the development of
my own practice (…) but I will not call what I have been doing research (…). (Agnes, reflection-note, August 2007)

These members express that they take part in the project to develop their own guiding practice and our joint practice, and to get to know action research. It was also stated that they contributed with data to the research. At the beginning of this article we pointed to the fact that the research topic was chosen and the initial plan was worked out by Sigrid. This is not an unusual situation:

Some groups are conveyed by one or two initiating researchers, familiar with the method, who choose an inquiry topic, invite others who are interested to join, and initiate these co-opted members into the inquiry procedures. (Heron & Reason, 2001: 181)

Although this is not unusual it may have been one reason why the participants did not regard themselves as researchers. They had not taken part in the initial choice of neither topic nor methodology, they had merely agreed to participate. The fact that the initiator was herself a PhD-student with only restricted action research experience resulted in a rather closed initial phase, giving the participants little influence. Another aspect is the fact that the group-members knew little or nothing about action research. It was an intention that the participants should become initiated into the inquiry procedures through participation. There was however an imbalance in the power-relations because there was a lack of mutual methodological knowledge in the group.

From these experiences we have drawn the insight that in order to become a research-group there is a need for mutual planning and decision making. If this is not the case, the fact that there are one or two initiating researchers must be brought forth and discussed. We also found that the initiation depend on the researchers having a mutual theoretical underpinning of action research in order to be able to discuss, choose and create the methodology to suit their purpose. This requires that the members agree to read and discuss action research theory as part of the initiating research.

During the second year of the inquiry we had several discussions about the research process; what it meant for us to be doing co-operative action research. We analyzed our research-practice, and this analysis was crucial for the changed attitude, as all the participants started to regard themselves as co-researchers.

In some cases I have participated in inquiry dialogues in the project. For example today while we discussed what co-operative action research is. Now I see clearly that we are doing co-operative research (…) by taking part in the discussion concerning concepts belonging to the research (in opposition to developing our daily teaching practice,
Discussing concepts, writing and presentations were regarded as necessary for the perception of doing research. Taking part in planning, observing, acting and reflecting (the action research cycle) was not, as Sigrid had thought, sufficient. “If I am to be a researcher I have to think, analyze data and write” (Agnes, research-meeting, August 2007). Analysis and publishing was seen as a crucial part of the process if it was to be research.

Then: “What does the notion of analyzes imply? Traditionally that is when we sit down with data. But here we do take part in the analysis”. (Henrik, research-meeting, August 2007). We experienced the two levels of analyses as expressed in figure 1. We were orally analyzing our practice within the research-dialogue. The analysis needed to be analyzed again for theorizing in order for our experiences to reach out from our local context.

The next step in our research-practice was to acquire and use tools as Eneroth’s methods (1984) for identifying changes and factors leading to the changes. Then we were able to more consciously create and plan our own analyzing strategies. We will give one example: In December 2009 we had a research-meeting devoted to analyzing the research competency developed in the group. Each member wrote a reflection note trying to express the characteristics of their competency as it was at that time, how it had changed during the project-period (process method) and what factors had brought the changes on (dialectical method). These reflection-notes were read to the group. In smaller groups these expressions were analyzed with the help of Eneroth’s methods. What were common features in the presentations? The small groups presented their results to each other, and the common features were summarized. A main conclusion was that we had developed a common research-platform. This was a significant outcome of the research project influencing our organization.

Implications of this change in competency were many, regarding guiding of masters and PhD-students, but also within the teacher education. A main assignment for the student teachers in their third and final semester had long been a pedagogical developmental project. Many students adopted the action research approach and started to investigate their own practice in groups, due to our increased ability to guide and direct such processes. In this way exploring and improving our research practice also enhanced our guiding practice in a way that positively influenced the student teachers’ attitude towards their teaching:

It is inspiring to us when we experience that you teachers put so much emphasis into changing practice (…) you become role-models for us who are going into practice – this engagement rubs off. (Presentation from student-group 1, from video, November 2008)
Another group reflected on the limited time there is in the everyday work-life, and yet they concluded in saying that if they were not to inquire into their teaching practice then “one will stagnate as a teacher. Then one might lose the motivation because you will be doing the same thing every day”. This inquiring attitude was regarded as another achievement on the road towards a more relevant teacher education.

Conclusion
We started out posting the question of how teacher educators can improve their individual and collective practice. Throughout the text we have sought to show how this was accomplished by the systematic and cyclic approach of plan-act-reflect. Regular research-meetings of some length (half or full days) over a three year period was a key to our results. Secondly, commitment and openness of the group-members were key factors. Willingness to share experiences – flaws as well as successes - and openness to each others’ ideas were crucial. By such openness each teacher educators’ repertoire was increased by learning from the other’s multifaceted skills and experiences. Three years is a long time, and after the first year we had accomplished measurable change in our guiding practice, however it was over the two following years that we deepened our understanding of action research as a strategy for organizational change. We experienced that improvement of our collective action research practice required considerable time; firstly to be accepted in the community and in secondly to be fortified and become sustainably institutionalized. This text is an expression of our organizations’ theory in use, or our co-operative living theory that was developed through the process. We clarified the values of love, empathy and co-operation and here we have tried to show how these values are expressed in our guiding-and research-practice, as well as pointing to some theoretical aspects influencing and explaining our lived practice. We claim that we have strived to empower ourselves to make and create worthwhile change in our practice and by that also contributed to the student teachers’ ability and will to do the same in their practice, to use the terms of Elliot (2011).

The project was carried out in a time where our work was under stress of many new demands, and there was a need for a unifying project in order to sustain and develop a co-operative practice. The stressful situation is normal in a working life characterized by risk, networking, short-term team working and most of all, flexibility, according to Sennet (1998). These conditions may jeopardize relationships, long term commitment and long term planning. Action research proved to be a way of ensuring deepened involvement in our commitments, and was a source for relational immersion.

Co-reflection in relation to specific work tasks is the foundation for improving individual as well joint practice. Because the tasks are at the center of everyone’s workday, commitment does not
require a lot of extra time taken for more demanding activities, although it does require the will to agree to long-term commitment and the interest to improve practice. Analyzing as means of presenting and publishing does take time, however these are also activities demanded in our line of work. Long-time commitment to inquiry in a co-operative manner bears the potential of deepened relations. Teaching becomes more of a joint concern, and thus counteracts the individualistic, fragmented work-life that threatens to take the joy and passion out of our work.

References


