RESEARCH CIRCLES: A METHOD FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE CREATION OF CHANGE IN PRACTICE

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Resumo

Este artigo contém uma apresentação de experiências adquiridas com círculos de investigação como método participante capaz de gerar conhecimento e mudança de práticas. Dois projetos internacionais constituem o nosso ponto de partida, cujo objetivo foi o de produzir conhecimento sobre o trabalho profissional que está a ser feito com os jovens que apresentam comportamento violento. Nos sub-estudos suecos, os círculos de investigação são usados como um método para o desenvolvimento de tais conhecimentos, bem como para proporcionar mudança de práticas. O círculo de investigação como método tem o seu ponto de partida teórico na investigação-ação e na investigação participante. Os resultados do estudo demonstram como os círculos de investigação podem contribuir para a criação de um processo de conhecimento através do diálogo no grupo e a facilitação da reflexão sobre as diferentes abordagens de intervenção no próprio trabalho, mesmo que seja um método que não sirva a todos. Os resultados mostram também que o círculo de investigação pode conduzir a um processo de mudança no trabalho concreto e ao reforço da colaboração transprofissional levando ainda a um aumento da consciencialização dos participantes e da avaliação do seu trabalho com crianças e jovens violentos.

Palavras-chave

Círculos de investigação; Mudanças de práticas; colaboração transprofissional; Violência.

Résumé

Cet article contient une présentation des expériences des cercle de recherche en tant que méthode de participant capable de générer des connaissances et changement des pratique. Deux projets internationaux constituent notre point de départ, le but était de produire des connaissances sur le travail professionnel accompli avec les jeunes qui manifestent un comportement violent. Dans les sous-études suédoises, milieux de la recherche sont utilisés comme une méthode pour le développement de ces connaissances ainsi que pour la changement des pratique. Le cercle de recherche comme méthode a son point de départ théorique dans la recherche-action et la recherche participative. Les résultats de l'étude montrent comment les milieux de la recherche peut contribuer à la création d'un processus de connaissance par le dialogue dans le groupe et la facilitation de la réflexion sur les différentes approches d'intervention dans leur travail, même si ce est une méthode qui ne convient pas à tous. Les résultats montrent également que le cercle de recherche peut conduire à un processus de changement dans le présent ouvrage et le renforcement de la collaboration transprofessional toujours en tête à une sensibilisation accrue des participants et de l'évaluation de leur travail avec les enfants et les jeunes violents.

Mots-clés

Cercle de recherche; Changement des pratique; Collaboration transprofessional; Violence.

Abstract

This article contains a presentation of experiences gained of research circles as a participant-based method for the development of knowledge and the creation of change in practice. The starting point is two international projects whose aim is to develop knowledge about the professional work being done with young people who exhibit violent behavior. In the Swedish sub-studies, research circles are used as a method for developing such knowledge as well as for creating change in practice. The research circle as a method has its theoretical starting point in action research and participant-oriented research. The results of the study illustrate how research circles can contribute to the creation of a knowledge process through the dialogue in the group and the facilitation of reflection over different work approaches in one's own work, even if it is a method that does not suit everyone. The results also show that the research circle can lead to a change process in the actual work by enhancing transprofessional collaboration and leading to an increase in the participants' awareness and evaluation of their work with violent children and young people.

Keywords

Research circles; Practice change; Transprofessional collaboration; violence.

Resumen

Este artículo contiene una presentación de experiencias de los círculos de investigación como método participante capaz de generar conocimientos y cambio de prácticas. Dos proyectos internacionales constituyen nuestro punto de partida, cuya finalidad era producir conocimiento sobre el trabajo profesional qué está haciendo con los jóvenes que exhiben un comportamiento violento. En los sub-estudios suecos, los círculos de investigación se utilizan como un método para el desarrollo de tales conocimientos, así como para proporcionar cambio de prácticas. El círculo de investigación como método tiene su punto de partida teórico en la investigación-acción y la investigación participativa. Los resultados del estudio demuestran cómo los círculos de investigación pueden contribuir a la creación de un proceso de conocimiento a través del diálogo en el grupo y la facilitación de la reflexión sobre los diferentes abordajes de intervención en su trabajo, incluso si se trata de un método que no sirve para todos. Los resultados también muestran que el círculo de investigación puede conducir a un proceso de cambio en el trabajo concreto y el fortalecimiento de la colaboración sigue transprofesional lo que aumenta la conciencia de los participantes y la evaluación de su trabajo con los niños y los jóvenes violentos.

Palabras clave

Círculos de investigación; Cambios en las prácticas; colaboración transprofesional; Violencia.

During the 1970s a participant-oriented method was developed at Lund University in Sweden and was given the name research circle. The aim of this method is to create a meeting place for practitioners and researchers to jointly be able to find ways to create new knowledge and implement existing research at an operational level (Holmstrand & Härnsten, 2003). Research circles are often used within different operational areas, both within the field of social work and of school and pre-school. The contents of this article are based on the experiences gained from two international projects with financing from the European Commission's third Daphne programme: *Developing quality-based support for young people with violent behaviour* (Fröhlich-Gildhoff, Kjellman, Lecaplain et al., 2011) and *Supportive tools for resilient, open-minded and non-violent grassroots work in schools* (Fröhlich-Gildhoff Kjellman, Lecaplain et al., 2013). The aim of the first project (published 2011) was to implement and develop the knowledge from a previous research project that had been carried out on the basis of interviews with young people who had committed various forms of violent crime as well as interviews with professionals who meet young people with violent behaviour in their daily work (Fröhlich-Gildhoff, Wigger, Lecaplain et. al. 2008). Based on the results of the project (published 2011), the school environment was identified as being the most important arena for preventing young people from developing violent behaviour. Consequently, in the following project (published 2013), the overall aim of the project was to examine how the school personnel at a limited number of selected schools work to combat aggressive behaviour among the pupils, such as bullying and degrading and derogatory treatment. A more specific aim was to find methods for strengthening the pupils and to implement a change process aimed at creating an atmosphere of security and wellbeing at the schools (Fröhlich-Gildhoff, Kjellman, Lecaplain et. al, 2013). In both project, research circles were used in the Swedish sub-studies (Högdin, Kjellman & Svensson, 2011; Högdin, Kjellman & Ranagården, 2013).

The aim of this article is to draw benefit from the experiences gained of the work with research circles as a participant-based research method for the development of knowledge and the creation of change in practice. The questions to be addressed are: How do the participants in the research circles define knowledge development and the creation of change in the practical work with violent young people? Do the participants describe the research circle as having contributed to a knowledge and change process that is of significance to the practical work with violent young people and, if so, in which way?

The research circle as a method

The research circle has its theoretical starting point in action research and participant-oriented research, with the aim of creating a beneficial meeting between theory and practice (see, for example, Brydon-Miller, Greenwood & Maguire 2003; Starrin 1993; Lundberg & Starrin, 2001). Research tradition views the research process as a matter of common interest for researchers and practitioners alike, with both parties seen as equals. The starting point is a common endeavour to achieve knowledge development and to search for knowledge, which is intended to lead to a more democratic production of knowledge (Holmstrand, 2006; Lewin, 1997). The goal is to contribute knowledge for the practitioners who are part of the development of that knowledge. In this way the aim is to enhance the practitioners' influence over the knowledge development process (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). There is, in other words, an expressed ambition to break down any hierarchies that may exist between practice and research. Reason (1994) emphasises that the aim of the tradition of research is change, regardless of whether the starting point is to reform institutions to become more democratic or to illustrate the production of knowledge as a political action. The aim is to create a forum or meeting place for practitioners and researchers where an organised search for knowledge and a process of knowledge development can take place in dialogue between all of the participants. This form of meeting means that the role of the researcher is that of a participant in a knowledge-generating discussion together with the other members of the group. The researcher often assumes the role of circle leader for the creative dialogue and is responsible for

ensuring that the discussions contain scientific perspectives. The research circle is based on a common theme or problem that is illustrated and discussed in as comprehensive a manner as possible with the aim of increasing knowledge about that particular theme or problem. The contents and structure of the research circle are not pre-determined in advance but are instead developed via discussion among the participants. The intention is for the participants to achieve a more in-depth level of insight and for new knowledge to be generated in relation to the theme or issue in question. The discussions in the research circle should be documented in order to illustrate the knowledge that the practitioners possess (Holmstrand & Härnsten, 2003). Härnsten (1995; 2001) describes that the goal is to provide the participants with conditions that enable them to change their work and address a problem in a more satisfactory manner.

Theoretical perspectives on research circles

A central concept for the research circle is that of *empowerment*. This term can be viewed in part as a *theory* and in part as a *method*. Initially, the theory's starting point was primarily based on a structural model that assumes that society consists of groups that differentiate themselves from one another due to the fact that they have access to different amounts of power and different levels of control over resources (Gutiérrez, 1990). The common ground is an endeavour to work to enhance the ability of individuals or groups to create change and gain power over a problematic situation. These days, empowerment-oriented methods are primarily practised within social work and other social change mechanisms. Within the school environment the terms *empowerment-oriented learning* or *empowerment pedagogy* are often used (Ahlberg, 2001). Freire (1970) is a central source of inspiration when it comes to *empowerment pedagogy*. He emphasises the importance of dialogue for learning and knowledge development and for getting people to feel a sense of belief in their own ability. Freire also highlights change processes and describes how change is created through a critical dialogue between people who treat one another as equals and how increased awareness leads to a desire to take part in social change. Evans' (1992) review of empowerment methods highlights three processes at an individual level that lead to a development of an individual's ability to think critically.

1. *Development of skills* means allowing the recipients themselves to find the answers to their questions and that the provider highlights the strengths and abilities that the recipient already possesses.
2. *With an enhanced valuation of one's self-image* the feeling of being competent grows.
3. *Increased awareness* can mean that personal problems are changed into structural problems in the individual's consciousness.

The research circle is based on the idea of *empowerment pedagogy* as a way to generate knowledge and change processes within a specific area. The central factor is that the participants integrate new knowledge with old experiences, which can be connected to Dewey's theory (1999) on experience-based learning. Dewey formulated an activity-based form of pedagogy and developed ideas around the concept of "learning by doing". Activity and motivation, along with a holistic view of a child's learning, were things that characterised his thoughts on pedagogy. Dewey viewed practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge as being equally valuable. He maintained that a person's own personal experience was the thing that provided lasting knowledge, although he also pointed out that the practical assignments must be connected to theoretical knowledge and that it is important to study reality in order to then be able to make theoretical connections. Vygotsky (Strandberg, 2006) also describes the contents of the psychological processes through which learning occurs – thinking, talking, problem-solving, reading, emotions and desire. These processes are activities and it is in people's practical and actual lives that the psychological processes have their foundation. Even though Dewey's and Vygotsky's theories have been developed for the learning that takes place via the interaction between pupils and teachers in the school environment, they can still be applied to the processes in the research circle that are created via the interaction between the participants in the group.

Method and implementation

In the two EU projects that were presented earlier, research circles were used in the Swedish sub-project as a method for implementing existing research in practice and for developing new knowledge in relation to the work with violent young people. All of the documentation from the research circles is used as the basis for the analysis of the work with the method. This documentation consists of handwritten notes and transcriptions of recordings from the circle meetings as well as the results of the process questionnaire that the participants were asked to complete after each meeting. In addition, network maps are used in relation to the interaction between various actors who work with young people, along with questionnaires regarding their work situation. In the second project, teachers and pupils at the two grade schools were also asked to complete a questionnaire before and after the project was carried out at the schools. The documentation has been weighed up, thematised and compiled under a number of headings that together provide an overall illustration of the experiences gained from using the research circle as a method.

Developing quality-based support for young people with violent behaviour

In the first project, research circles were used as a method for the dissemination of the results from an earlier project as well as for the development of new knowledge and the creation of change. The research circles were carried out in six different groups consisting of professionals and volunteers who meet violent young people in their everyday work in three Swedish municipalities, and researchers from Halmstad University. Three of the groups was purely profession-specific groups, consisted of (group 1) eight social workers who work with youth cases at two different units within the same social department at the Swedish Social Services, (group 2) six police officers who work with youth investigations at two police stations, and (group 3) four school counsellors from schools in four different catchment areas (the schools in question represent the full range of grades in Swedish grade schools, grades 1-9). The remaining three groups can

be described as area-specific groups. These groups consisted of between eight and thirteen professionals and volunteers from various authorities, institutions and organisations, for example teachers, school curators, field assistants, police officers, priests, deacons, health and care personnel and people who work (either for remuneration or for free) for voluntary organisations such as Criminals Return Into Society (CRIS) and various Swedish voluntary street patrol organisations (Mothers and Fathers in Town, The Watch Patrol etc.). The thing that the participants in the area-specific groups had in common was that they all worked within one and the same demarcated geographical area. Each research circle was led by two researchers from Halmstad University, who start the meetings, summarise the previous meeting and, when necessary, help the discussions to progress by asking relevant questions. The role of the research circle leader was, however, usually relatively low-key during the discussions.

Each group met on at least eight occasions for about three hours, with roughly one month between each meeting. Each research circle was initiated with a start-up meeting at which the results of the previous study were presented and discussed. The participants were then asked to discuss their expectations and their ideas regarding an appropriate structure and content for future meetings. After this each research circle conducted *around six further meetings* at which the participants met and discussed their work with, and their experiences regarding, young people with violent or provocative behaviour. All of the research circles discussed anonymised cases in relation to the results from the earlier research project and other current research. *A final meeting* was held at which the groups discussed what knowledge means to them and how they obtain new knowledge. The participants were asked to fill in a *process questionnaire* after each meeting, and they were also asked to write down their final reflections at the last meeting.

Supportive tools for resilient, open-minded and non-violent grassroots work in schools

In the second project, research circles were carried out with teachers, curators and school hosts who worked to combat violence and degrading behaviour at two Swedish grade schools. A separate research circle was carried out at each school, one with five participants and one with six participants. Additionally, at least two

researchers from Halmstad University attended each meeting. In total each group met for two hours on approximately seven occasions during a period of around 9 months. The theme that was in focus during the research circles was violence, discrimination and degrading treatment in the school environment. The work in the research circles primarily consisted of discussions, whereby the school personnel themselves formulated their needs. The discussions had to do with the different types of violence, discrimination and degrading treatment that took place at each school, and what the school personnel did in order to combat and stop such violence and behaviour. Focus was placed on discussions regarding the development of the school personnel's work. During the time between each meeting, the participants carried out exercises with the pupils in their respective classes. These exercises had been designed by the researchers in the joint international project The participants in the research circles in the Swedish sub-project made their own choices regarding which exercises they deemed to be most appropriate in their student group. The exercises were then modified and developed in order to work in the specific context. At the final meeting the participants were given the opportunity to reflect on the contents of the research circles as well as the importance of the circles in relation to their practical work.

Experiences from the research circles

This presentation contains an account of the experiences of the participants in the two Swedish sub-projects when it comes to the research circle as a method for the creation of knowledge and change in the work with violent young people. This account is based on the circle participants' descriptions of the knowledge and change processes that arose in conjunction with the research circle, which are apparent not only from the discussions that took place during the circle meetings and from the information provided in the process questionnaires, but also from other materi-

als that were used in connection with the research circles. Although it is difficult to separate the knowledge process that occurred in the research circles from the change process that was implemented in the work with the young people in the participants' various operations and activities, the results from the project are presented under two primary headings, the basis of which is the assumption that such a separation is in fact possible.

The knowledge process

In all of the research circles it was discussed how the participants view knowledge in general and how they intend to obtain new knowledge in their everyday work. The participants describe how knowledge for them can be awareness of various methods and theories that they can use in their work, although the thing that is emphasised the most is the practical experience that they have gained from their work. On the whole the participants find it difficult to define exactly what this practical knowledge might consist of. Instead they discuss the contexts in which they have obtained knowledge. For example, one of the participants says that "*my education and training has taught me the theoretical aspects, but I feel that I have learnt the most during my time of practice together with more experienced practitioners*" (Social worker/profession-specific group). A number of participants in all of the research circles emphasise the importance of practical learning.

A number of participants describe the opportunity for further education within the framework for their work as an important component of the knowledge development process. Some participants, in particular those from the police and social services, say that they seldom have time for further education and that it is not something that is prioritised by their management. They express a desire to have a greater opportunity to receive further education, in particular in relation to methods that could be of benefit to them in their work. Other participants describe how they find it easier to make time for further education and training courses and that there is often sufficient financial resources for such activities at their

workplace. To obtain new knowledge other than through any further education or training courses, some say that they primarily go to their colleagues or their manager in order to ask how they would handle a specific situation. Tutoring, handbooks, general recommendations or statute books are also described as important sources of new knowledge.

When you need more knowledge you go to the statute book, or else you approach your colleagues or manager. In [another town] it is possible to receive tutoring in a group that is led by a behavioural science specialist. I really miss that. (Police officer/profession-specific group)

The participants have different opinions about the importance of new knowledge. Some search for current research on their own initiative. They name websites on the Internet as a primary source, while some read online reports. Other participants say that they seldom have time to search for and read research materials on their own. Some describe how they become aware of new research if they happen to stumble across something in trade magazines or in the proposals for new legislation. A number of participants are not particularly interested in finding out about current research, it seldom contains anything new. On the whole the participants describe how they would rather obtain new knowledge through meetings, by which they mean meetings with clients, colleagues and business developers, or through some form of tutoring and consultation. Some of the participants stress the fact that there is a general lack of knowledge regarding what actually works well in the work with violent young people.

We don't really have all that much knowledge. Even in a successful case we can't be sure about what we have actually contributed. Perhaps it might have worked out okay anyway, even without our intervention, or perhaps it all worked out okay in the end DESPITE our intervention. (Social worker/profession-specific group)

A number of participants explain how they deem the exchange of experiences that has taken place through the discussions in the research circle to be knowledge. However, some participants say that a more traditional form of education would have suited them better and that they would have liked to have received descriptions of more concrete knowledge, for example methods in the treatment of violent young people. In a discussion among the participants about whether they would wish to be part of a new research circle, one participant says *yes, if there is an opportunity to learn about various methods and tools, but not otherwise* (Priest/area-specific group). Another participant says that she

had hoped that the project would *help me to find some model* (Social worker/area-specific group) to use in the work with children who exhibit violent or provocative behaviour, but that this had not been the case.

A number of participants describe how they have obtained new knowledge during the discussions in the research circles, in the form of tips and ideas that they can use in their work. Some participants point out that the information they have received about how other professions and volunteers work with young people has provided them with new knowledge about where they can turn for assistance in relation to various issues. However, most of the participants find it difficult to put their finger on exactly what knowledge they have gained during the research circles, although a number do describe how it primarily has to do with them having developed another approach or a new perspective on violent young people than what they had previously. In all of the groups there were discussions about the importance of dialogue and reflection as being central to the participants' own knowledge development and to the knowledge process that arose in the research circles.

The importance of dialogue to the development of knowledge

When the circle participants discuss what knowledge means to them, they bring up the following keywords: *communication, exchange of experiences, sharing one's own thoughts and ideas with others* and *listening*. In other words, knowledge is described as something that is created through communication between different individuals. One of the participants says that *knowledge can be the thing one gets from someone else, for example through dialogue. A discussion is something you want to win, whereas dialogue is a sort of introduction where you listen to each other and where knowledge can develop* (Field assistant/area-specific group).

Some participants describe how they have a major need of engaging in dialogue with others who work with young people, in order to exchange experiences and share concrete tips that they can use in their work. All groups emphasise the importance of being given an opportunity to *discuss problems that arise, be able to support one another, exchange experiences,* and *play around with ideas for how to build more sustainable and long-term work methods.* A number of participants say that they seldom have time for this type of dialogue in their everyday work.

The research circle's work method means that the participants are intended to meet and jointly discuss

the theme that is in focus. A number of participants describe how the discussions and the exchanges of experience that have taken place during the research circle have been important for their own knowledge development. Example of a conversation at the final circle meeting in the second project regarding how they felt about their research circle:

Teacher A: *It's positive that we've had time to discuss our children.*

Teacher B: *We don't usually find the time to talk about our children. When we have study days we just do things that feel totally pointless. Study days that aren't used for relevant assignments could be used better, for example for this type of dialogue. It's necessary to have time at one's own school to discuss these sorts of issues.*

Teacher C: *We have always felt extremely welcome here.*

Teacher B: *It's been well organised, and the time has been well utilised.*

Teacher A: *When you leave the circle you do so with many new thoughts.*

According to the participants, the atmosphere in most of the research circles *was permissive and creative,* which they said meant that all of the participants *actively took part in the discussions*. In three of the research circles we identified some problems. Dominant participants tended to dominate the dialogue in one group. However, according to the information provided in the process questionnaires, the atmosphere in this group did actually improve the longer the research circle progressed. Initially a critical group of participants arrived at one of the research circles having been told to participate at short notice by their management. It became apparent from the discussion in the group that a number of them felt that they did not have the time to take part in the circle. It is apparent that the participants feel that they got more out of the discussions in the research circles when there was continuity in the group and the participants themselves had freely chosen to participate in the groups.

Scope to reflect on one's work
When the participants in the research circles discussed how they develop knowledge in their daily work, the importance of having scope to reflect on things was brought up on several occasions. A number of participants describe how reflection provides

an opportunity for them to increase their knowledge about what they actually do in their daily work and about the things that work well or not so well. This in turn provides an opportunity to find new solutions for how to resolve a situation and new ways of working. One participant says that reflection provides her with *better opportunities to gain a holistic perspective on acute events, as well as allowing me to think in terms of innovation and prevention* (Social worker/area-specific group). The thing that a number of the participants highlight as obstructing their opportunity for reflection is the fact that they don't have enough time. One participant says that *you need to have sufficient time in order to be able to do a good job* (Police officer/area-specific group). Several participants describe how it is difficult to reflect on one's own and how they try to gain time to reflect together with their colleagues. Some participants describe how, despite the lack of time that is officially set aside for reflection, they still try to make time to reflect together with colleagues when there is scope to do so.

At school there is a lack of resources time-wise. Problems are only resolved thanks to the fact that there are such dedicated teachers at the school. You run into each other, catch one another on the go. More time is needed to be able to actually finish what you are talking about. (School counsellor/second project)

The discussions in the groups also touched on the possible need for *a structure for reflection* and a basis *on which to base one's reflections*. The case descriptions were used as a basis for reflection in all of the research circles in the first project. This meant that, prior to each meeting; one or several participants prepared an anonymised presentation of a case with which they had worked on. The other participants in the group then reflected on the case based on their own experiences and made connections to applicable research within the area. The case descriptions provided an opportunity for the participants to reflect on the things that worked well in their work with young people with violent behaviour, as well as the things that could have been done better. A number of the participants described the case descriptions as an important element of the knowledge process in the research circles. Case descriptions were not used in the second project; instead the participants were asked to test concrete exercises among their pupils. This was a work method that was well received by the participants in the research circles, who described it as an opportunity to first test and then reflect on various different ways of working to combat bullying and degrading behaviour on the part of the pupils. *We were taking something and*

testing it in reality in order to see the results. This was a way for us to test different ideas (Teacher/second project). The participants describe how such a method provided them with an opportunity to reflect on how well different exercises worked, whether they could be applied and used in their work to combat violence and degrading behaviour among their pupils, and whether they could be implemented in other ways.

The change process

During the research circles a discussion took place about whether the participants' work with violent young people needs to lead to some change for the young people and their families. Such a change was described by the participants as being able to be created through their use of accepted methods in their work. Some participants worked entirely or partially with specific methods, while others did not. The participants also described other work methods that are important to the creation of change, such as dialogue with the young people and their parents, values-related exercises with pupils at the schools, and the importance of ensuring consensus between all of the actors who work with the young people so that the young people receive the same message from all of the adults they meet. Some of the participants also discussed the change processes that occur outside of the control of the professionals and the authorities.

At a number of meetings a discussion took place about turning points that many of the young people experience sooner or later, and about how difficult it is as a professional to instigate such a change for the young person in question. When it comes to being able to contribute to the occurrence of a change, the participants highlight the importance of collaboration between authorities, organisations and other projects and activities. In conjunction with this the participants emphasise the importance of being familiar with each other's work and of being able to help each other in different situations. The participants discuss the importance of being able to offer different alternatives and not always simply applying one and the same solution, treatment or method.

Turning points are the things that cause a young person's development to be changed. A person's own choice is important, having an opportunity to make a choice. It also requires courage to dare to make the most of an opportunity or situation, in other words the turning point. It's difficult to create these turning points. It's more a case of keeping tabs on the troublesome young people and steering them towards the relevant project or activity, where the turning points could exist for them. (Social worker/profession-specific group)

In a number of groups the participants expressed a concern that the research circles wouldn't actually provide any *real change in practice* or that the change processes that had been started would peter out once the research circle was finished. Within the framework for these research projects there was no opportunity to examine whether any real change had actually occurred for the young people and their parents and/or whether any such change lasted over time. Despite this, in several of the area-specific groups, the participants described how the discussions in the research circles had contributed to enhanced collaboration between the participants in their work with the young people in the area or at the school. In many groups the participants also described the occurrence of an individual change process, primarily in the form of a changed approach to their work with violent young people. A number of the participants say that they are aware of an inner change that has taken place within them and has resulted in them being more positive in relation to both the young people and their work, and feeling more confident in their professional role.

Increased collaboration across professional boundaries

In the first project, profession-specific groups and area-specific groups were formed. In the second project, both groups can be seen to be area-specific in nature, since they include a variety of different professions from one and the same school. The thinking behind these varied group constellations was that some groups would provide an opportunity for reflection within a specific profession and others would provide an opportunity for reflection between different professions. The participants in the profession-specific groups were given an opportunity to highlight, discuss and create new knowledge about the conditions for each profession in the work with violent young people. On the other hand, the participants in the area-specific groups – through their meeting with other professions and volunteers – were given an opportunity to discuss the collective work being done with violent young people in their specific geographical area or at their own school. Collaboration is described as

the key to creating understanding between different actors, clarifying the distribution of responsibilities between different actors, and jointly creating clear boundaries, norms and rules for the young people. Collaboration across professional boundaries is described as a success factor in all of the research circles and is highlighted as one of the most important criteria in the work with violent young people. The discussions regarding what it is that facilitates collaboration highlight the need to gain an insight into, and an understanding of, other professions' conditions and work, and the need to make the most of the work and efforts of volunteers within the framework for various voluntary organisations. Increased understanding between different professions is described by some participants as leading to a clearer distribution of responsibilities between different actors. *Through collaboration it is possible to gain increased knowledge, and the roles and the work become clearer* (Social worker/area-specific group). It is also described how different forms of professional networks are beneficial to the work. *A strong network with a clear form of collaboration is a good way to get the work with violent or troublesome children at school to be effective* (Teacher/area-specific group).

The thing that was most often described by the participants as the reason why they did not succeed particularly well in their work with violent young people and their families was shortcomings in the collaboration between the various authorities. A number of obstacles to effective collaboration were highlighted, such as a lack of resources, a duty of confidentiality (secrecy) between authorities, clashes between different starting points in the work, an ambiguous distribution of responsibilities, too many people being involved or problems with the personal chemistry between individuals. The participants discussed how the distribution of responsibilities had been ambiguous in a number of cases and had led to the problem *being bounced around between different actors without any collaboration actually taking place* (Police officer/area-specific group). One participant describes how *the young people end up in the middle and don't receive support from anyone* (Field assistant/area-specific group). Another participant describes how a lack of collaboration can actually contribute to young people developing violent behaviour. Some participants mention that there is a permanent trans professional operation in the area in which they work, as well as networks that meet regularly and that include both professionals and volunteers. All of the participants say that they are part of various forms of such collaborative groups or networks. The

results of the network maps also illustrate the existence of a well-established system for collaboration. Many of these collaborations are part of the working place's procedures and have been systematically developed and implemented.

In the area-specific groups the participants describe how the mix of participants in the research circle, with various professions being joined by representatives for various organisations and institutions, facilitated an increased level of understanding for each other's work methods and perspectives.

It is important to have understanding for one another and for the various professional roles that exist. It is important to maintain a holistic view. We can't all see a young person with the same eyes, but we can have a consensus whereby we have an understanding for each other's different experiences and knowledge. Different strengths and knowledge provide different opportunities in terms of how we view solutions and problems. In the past it was a case of trying to convince one another as to which view was the right one. But if you gain insight into the perspectives of others then hopefully you won't miss the individual behind it all. (Social worker/area-specific group)

Changed approach

The participants describe how the research circles have provided them with an opportunity to share their experiences with other professions and learn about the conditions that apply to other professions. A number of participants mentioned how the latter had led to an opportunity to find new approaches to their work with young people. Some participants in the research circles, in particular those who are not themselves formally qualified or trained in working with young people with specific problems, described how they gained a more positive approach in relation to these young people. Some participants also described how the contact with theories and research that had a specific focus on the work with violent young people had strengthened them in their work. This was particularly apparent in the second project, where the structure of the research circles was based on current research and empowerment theories and on the concept that the participants should work in a concrete manner with the aim of strengthening pupils in order to improve the school environment when it comes to degrading behaviour and bullying. Focus was initially placed primarily on the problems that existed among the pupils, and certain pupils were described as *problem students*. However, as time went on, the participants in the research circle began to increasingly focus on the pupils' strengths and assets.

It's good to have received explanations and knowledge about what it is that takes place between the pupils. I now see that which is going on with new eyes, whereas before my view of what was happening was more negative. I am now able to understand things better. (Teacher/second project)

The participants also changed their perspective during the project, from having primarily focused on the pupils who were the victims of violence and degrading behaviour to focusing more on the pupils who actually subject others to such treatment. The participants described how it was positive to gain an opportunity to relate to and reflect on a concrete approach when they work with issues like bullying and degrading behaviour. They are not trying to say that the problems disappear, but they do mean that the approach can make a positive difference and *that focusing on a child's assets and trying to work on that basis instead of focusing on the problem makes the work more positive. You break the negative spiral, and a positive approach is contagious* (Teacher/second project).

Some of the participants describe how *they went from seeing problems* at their workplace and among their colleagues to increasingly focusing on their own and their colleagues' strengths instead. A number of participants emphasise the importance of seeing each other and supporting one other in order to become more secure and confident in their professional roles and thus dare to take action in situations they find uncomfortable. A number of participants described how the research circles had meant that they themselves had been strengthened by having their attention drawn to how important their work with the young people actually is, and how they can make a difference through their approach.

Some final reflections

It is apparent from this study that the participants in the research circles view knowledge in a way that is largely in keeping with Vygotsky's definition, whereby interaction and the social process is central to the development of knowledge (Strandberg, 2006). In the theory section, Freire's (1972) starting point in the dialogue between equal parties was described as a prerequisite for the creation of knowledge that makes the participants aware of different structures.

In most of the research circles, it can be noted that the dialogues have contributed to a beneficial knowledge process that has made the participants more aware of the conditions and structures that apply to their own profession and other professions, as well as how this affects the work with violent young people. Such a process requires a permissive group climate where the participants can meet and together generate a creative dialogue that is based on continuity, voluntariness and commitment to the theme in focus. In order to bring any hidden feelings of antagonism or hidden power structures out into the open, a process questionnaire that is completed by the participants after each meeting is an important tool. The research circles contributed to providing the participants with an opportunity to discuss and reflect on what they did that worked well, and what worked less well, in their work with violent young people. They also received an opportunity to exchange thoughts and ideas with one another and to find new ways to develop their existing work together. It was, however, apparent that the dialogue-based knowledge process did not suit all of the participants, some participants would have preferred a more traditional form of education instead.

The participants in the first project had the opportunity to use case descriptions as a basis for the discussions in the research circles, while the participants in the second project carried out exercises with their pupils between the circle meetings. Based on these approaches, an opportunity was created for the participants to reflect on their actual work, something that can be seen as a form of experience-based learning or can be described in terms of "learning by doing". According to Dewey (1999), such forms of learning are desirable for the creation of lasting knowledge. It can also be noted that Vygotsky's description of the psychological processes through which learning takes place, involving the concepts of thinking, talking, problem-solving, reading, emotions and desire, have all been consistently present during the process (Strandberg, 2006). It is hoped that the projects have seen the commencement of discussions and reflections that will continue even after the end of the research circles. There is, however, a risk that the scope for such discussions and reflections does not exist in the participants' everyday work situations, and the question of whether or not there will be a continuation of such activities is primarily a managerial and organisational issue, since a decision is required to officially allocate time to such discussion and reflection.

Freire (1992) describes how change processes arise through a critical dialogue between people. In some research circles the process has primarily been knowledge-generating in nature, while in other groups the process has led to change in the participants' own work operations and activities. The change process has primarily consisted of enhancing collaboration across professional boundaries and of the participants receiving an opportunity to change their own approach to their work. The participants in the profession-specific groups were given the opportunity to discuss and reflect on the conditions that apply within their own profession. This entailed a more in-depth understanding of their profession's structures, obstacles and opportunities in the work with violent young people. In the area-specific groups, on the other hand, one of the primary benefits was described as the fact that the research circle initiated a change process that contributed to the enhancement of prevailing forms of collaboration across professional boundaries and the establishment of new networks. Collaboration across professional boundaries is described as a success factor in all of the groups and is highlighted as one of the most important criteria in the work with violent young people. On the whole it can be noted that the dialogue receives a different starting point and content depending on the mix of participants in the groups, in particular depending on the choice of profession-specific or area-specific group constellations. Different types of knowledge and change processes are created, depending on the make-up of the group. It can therefore be of importance to consider this aspect prior to the start of any research circle and to ask the question: is it profession-specific knowledge or knowledge across professional boundaries that should be in focus for this research circle?

The process that takes place in the research circles contains clear elements of empowerment pedagogy, which entails strengthening individuals through learning and knowledge (Freire, 1972). In some of the research circles, particular in the second project, a process can be identified that can be likened to the one that Evans (1992) describes as central to empowerment work and which leads to the development of an individual's ability to think critically and an enhanced valuation of one's self-image. According to some participants, the research circles have led to increased self-confidence and an increased level of awareness in relation to their own work. They have also led to a change of perspective, from primarily focusing on problems to focusing more on opportunities, which has contributed to a change whereby the participants have been strengthened and feel happier in their work.

Whether or not any real and long-term change has actually taken place for the young people and their families is not something that can be determined within the framework for this study. Follow-up evaluations would be needed in order to find out whether – and, if so, in what way – changes have taken place over time. Finally, it should also be pointed out that it is the professionals' perspective that has been in focus during these research circles and, as a consequence, it is the professionals who have been afforded the right of interpretation when it comes to the young people's situations and needs. This entails a reproduction of a power structure that is already palpable between the professionals and the young people and their families. Even though it can be noted that the professionals possess a large amount of knowledge about this phenomenon, it must still be remembered that the young people's perspective is missing in this study. An important complement to this study would therefore be to find a participant-oriented research model that includes the young people in the future production of knowledge and future change processes.

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