Transgressing theory/practice divides through collaboration. Building research communities with professionals

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Abstract

This article contributes to discussions of transmethodology by drawing on experiences from conducting practice research aimed at the development of theory and practice through research collaboration. We analyze efforts to build research communities where researchers and professionals work together to perform analyses and develop knowledge. A collective research project exploring children's possibilities for participation in school is used as a case for exploring how a research problem develops through such collaboration. This research project was designed to explore school life from the perspectives of children, parents, teachers, school leaders, and psychologists, and to analyze conflicts situated in everyday practices while considering political struggles concerning the school as a historical institution. The article emphasizes the often intangible and overlooked processes involved in research collaboration and details how we worked to build a research

community comprising researchers and professionals that enabled collective multi-per-spective analyses. Building on a dialectical approach, we conceptualize conflicts as part of historical processes and as an immanent potentiality that arises from people's engagement in common but contradictory matters. Hence, the different perspectives of those involved in children's school life can be seen as linked through common matters, while also being differentiated by their allotted tasks in relation to children's school life. This approach continuously challenged the researchers to analyze everyday conflicts grounded in the different perspectives of those involved, the different forms of reasoning, understandings, and standpoints, as well as how the different perspectives are connected through the participants' engagement in a common matter – providing good schools for children. The article concludes by arguing that the discussed approach to theory development can be linked to a situated concept of generalization.

Practice research as transmethodology?

One of the transgressive aspirations of the concept of transmethodology is to challenge the boundaries or divisions that are often set up between theory and practice in conceptions of scientific knowledge and thereby encourage reflections on the dialogical and collaborative nature of knowledge production (Khawaja & Kousholt, 2021). The critique of the artificial divide between theory and practice is the foundation for the tradition of practice research that we have been part of for the last two-three decades. In a broad sense, the term practice research points to an ambition to bridge theory– and practice development and conduct research as collaboration between the researchers and the research participants (e.g. Chimirri & Pedersen, 2019; Højholt & Kousholt, 2014, 2019a; Mørck &

Huniche, 2006). Thus, discussions about transmethodology present an opportunity both to contribute to the development of the transmethodology concept through experiences from conducting practice research, and to stimulate exploration of the transgressive elements in practice research and how to develop knowledge through collaboration.

As stated, practice research builds on a critique of the idea that theory development is only possible by establishing a distance and separation from everyday practice (Jensen, 2001; Schraube, 2015) – a critique that is also reflected in Haraway's argument for "situated knowledge" as opposed to the idea of objective knowledge as "a view from above, from nowhere" (1988, p.589). Even though this notion of theory development from a point of nowhere has been widely criticized among proponents of qualitative methodologies, we find it still plays a part in discussions about research and between researchers and the people they involve in their research.

The critique of hierarchical divisions between research and practice and of theory development as something detached from everyday life is not new; nor are methodological approaches to collaborative and participatory research (e.g. Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Gallagher, 2018; Phillips et al. 2012; Torre et al. 2012; Whyte, 1991). At the same time, preordained standards for what constitutes scientific research seem to be on the rise, with researchers expected to apply abstract principles and standardized procedures, e.g., for ethical approval or 'SOTA' (State Of The Art), to ensure the "rigor", "reliability", and "objectivity" of their methods and results. In our experience, in particular when supervising PhD students, such standardized procedures, which rely heavily on the possibility of predefining research problems and methods, often become straitjackets that limit curiosity, creativity, inventiveness, and flexibility to address dilemmas that arise during the research process – all of which can be seen as core aspects of collaborative research approaches

(Chimirri & Pedersen, 2019; Højholt & Kousholt, 2019a; Kousholt, 2016). In this way, collaborative research seems to be faced with a paradox: on the one hand, collaborative research traditions have established a foothold and relevancy through a critique of scientific criteria developed within a positivist paradigm; on the other hand, researchers working with such approaches can experience pressure to employ these same criteria in their fight for scientific legitimacy. In positivist paradigms, theories are often considered as a set of concepts independent of social practice that can be applied both in research and in practice, and science is associated with ready-made models (Goulart et al., 2021). Challenging such notions of theory forms part of the tradition of practice research (Dreier, 2007; Jensen, 1999) and can be seen as a backdrop for our ambition in this article to show how theory development is entangled in collaboration and embedded in practical activity.

In this article, we explore and discuss various practical and processual aspects of collaborative research – aspects that are often not reported in research literature, but in a way serve as a backdrop for the analyses that usually take center stage. A similar idea is put forward in Simovska et al. (2019) of "turning inside out" less visible parts of the research process, which is also in line with the ambition of this special issue to encourage attention to the often unpredictable and untidy character of research processes (Khawaja & Kousholt, 2021).

Our discussions draw on the research project "Conflicts about children's school life"[1], which explored children's possibilities for participation in school through a shared focus on social conflicts. The article begins by presenting the methodological and theoreti-

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1 Collective research project, funded by the Danish Research Council, 2014-2018. https://typo3.ruc.dk/nc/en/department-of-people-and-technology-dpt/research/childrens-inclusion-in-school-as-conflictual-collaboration-between-families-teachers-school-leaders-and-legislation/

cal foundations of practice research and discussing the idea of research as conflictual collaboration. We then outline the reasoning behind the research design, which provides a backdrop for discussing how the research developed through some of the dilemmas we faced during our collaboration. We explore how the (problematic) relations between research and practice regarding Danish public schools became concrete conditions for the research collaboration – and hereby exemplify the entangled processes of developing theory/method/collaboration.

We particularly focus on the complex practical-organizational processes involved in our effort to build a research community bringing together researchers and professionals and establishing opportunities for collective analysis that produces new knowledge. As part of this focus, we analyze how conflicts about how to understand children's problems also constituted dilemmas that the researchers had to deal with in their collaboration with co-researchers and each other – for instance, during meetings. We then illustrate how the concept of conflict served as a vehicle for multi-perspective analyses. We conclude by reflecting on how the article's analyses of ongoing theorizing in practice can contribute to an understanding of situated generalization.

Our aim of exploring how knowledge is produced through collaboration goes beyond merely reporting our findings (a transgressive attempt also found in Bagga-Gupta & Dahlberg, 2021, in this volume). We explore both the practical organization and the social processes of the aforementioned research collaboration in order to exemplify how the general methodological approach becomes significant for the concrete encounters between researchers and co-researchers (for example, in project meetings). This includes discussing how theoretical and analytical work is part of such collaboration, constituting a quite prac-

tical activity and a collective process that takes place in the course of everyday life (and not distanced from such everyday settings).

Outlining and discussing collaborative processes in relation to a specific research project will not provide a recipe or a set of standards for others to follow. However, learning about the experiences of other researchers, and not least the challenges and dilemmas they have faced, can offer inspiration when trying to conduct research as collective processes in close collaboration with those within the field of practice that is being studied. To this end, we not only share specific experiences and dilemmas, but also present conceptual reflections that can underpin collaborative methodologies, and discuss ideas of research quality – not as something universal or fixed, but as integral to discussions of epistemology and of the relevance of research in addressing a given problem or issue within practice. In this spirit, we share our reflections and doubts, the dilemmas we faced and how we worked through them, developing our theoretical understanding in the process.

Transforming theory and practice through research collaboration

The Danish philosopher Uffe Juul Jensen (2001) has discussed the idea of science and theory development as something that must be cleansed of practical, subjective, and concrete circumstances – enabled by the researcher's distance from the object of study – as 'scholastic reasoning'. He argues that the critique of scholastic reason also entails a critique of ideas of separating the process of theorizing from practice – from practical activity. Building on Jensen's argument, the focus shifts to how researchers can take part in and engage with practice. In this approach, knowledge is seen as related to one's involvement in the world, engaging with particular matters (Jensen, 1999). Jensen argues that scientific

knowledge can be achieved through systematic analysis of concrete and variable conditions, pointing out that the confrontation with "the scholastic point of view" is not only a matter of a different way of understanding the relationship between theory and practice but, in a more far-reaching perspective, of reorganizing the practical relationship between researchers and research participants (Jensen, 2001).

Dorothy Smith, a key figure in the development of critical ethnography, makes a similar argument for breaking with objectifying practices within sociology, suggesting that researchers need to make the "standpoint of people" the jumping-off point for their studies, which entails regarding the researcher and the people involved as sharing a common foundation as inhabitants of the same world (Smith, 2005). The above critique also involves a shift in the subject matter of research from "other people's problems" to "common problems in a common world" (Højholt & Kousholt, 2019a; Kousholt, 2016). Proposing that researchers and co-researchers deal with common problems can furthermore be seen as a critique of theoretical concepts as a means of tidying up the mess of everyday life, putting things in order and giving instructions as to how practice should develop. Both research and professional practice are messy endeavors where researchers and professionals struggle to understand the contradictions they deal with and create 'order'. As societal practices are simultaneously collective and conflictual, participants must both deal with contradictions and coordinate their actions to make things work (Axel, 2011).

Methodological foundation of practice research

The methodology of practice research builds on Marxist philosophy or "philosophy of praxis", upholding a vision of the scientist as a participant in practice and in changing the world (Bernstein, 1971; Jensen, 1999). The concept of practice research employed in this article is closely linked to critical psychology and subject science (e.g. Dreier,

2003, 2008; Mørck & Huniche, 2006; Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013) and designates endeavors to organize research as mutual learning processes with co-researchers and to develop knowledge through collaboration (Højholt & Kousholt, 2019a). The concept of co-researchers emphasizes that research participants, as part of their conduct of everyday life, explore issues of concern to their everyday lives in order to better understand and deal with them, and that researchers can learn from taking part in such reflections (Chimirri & Pedersen, 2019; Holzkamp, 2013; Højholt & Kousholt, 2019a; Kousholt, 2016).

The above methodological approach is based on a theoretical understanding of human beings as participants in historical structures of social practice (Dreier, 2003, 2009; Hedegaard, Chaiklin, & Jensen, 1999; Lave, 2008, 2011; Chaiklin & Lave, 1993; Lave, 2019). Social practices are arranged as ways of dealing with various common societal problems and tasks. Such tasks and endeavors are part of what we term common matters. As an example, the education of children can be seen as a common matter. People are connected through the common matters in which they participate. Moreover, common matters are many-sided and contradictory, and there are differences in how people engage with and are positioned within them (Axel, 2020[2]; Axel & Højholt, 2019; Højholt & Kousholt, 2020).

This theoretical approach is grounded in reworkings of the concept of *praxis* (Bernstein, 1971; Lave, 2011, 2019; Ollman, 2003, 2015), which gives prominence not only to unity of action and thinking, but also to a particular vision of science, as outlined by the Polish philosopher and political activist Cieszkowski: "… [science as] a philosophy

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2 Axel uses the term common causes. We prefer to use matters since this connotes "what matters to us" and in this way connects subjects with situations. However, the main point is the same: common causes/matters refer to the point that humans, in their historical social praxis, arrange practices to deal with societal problems and tasks, such as education/schools or production/companies.

of practical activity, of '*praxis*', exercising a direct influence on social life and developing the future in the realm of concrete activity" (Cieszkowski cited in Bernstein, 1971: xi).

A praxis philosophical foundation entails regarding research as an intersubjective enterprise, where both researchers and research participants are involved as agents that take part in transformative activities (Rey et al., 2019). As expressed by Goulart and Torres:

In this perspective, research is understood and assumed as a living process in which researcher and participants are agents of a dialogical experience, mobilized by subjective productions related to the topic studied. This characteristic breaks with the empiricist, positivist and mechanistic visions that assumed science as an arid, rigid and rationalist process in which the participant was a mere object that responded to instruments with a supposedly a priori scientific value (2021, p. 84).

This elaboration of how research must be understood as collaborative and dialogical is in line with the fundamental understanding of research participants as "co-researchers" and the basic tenet that researchers need to learn from the people involved in the research to develop relevant knowledge.

Research as conflictual collaboration

We anchor our discussion of research collaboration in Ollmann's terminology about common contradictory matters entailing different as well as common interests and concerns across different practices and different participants (2003, 2015). The question of what constitutes a good school for every child is contradictory and controversial on multiple levels, from the children playing in the schoolyard to the politicians deciding school reforms (e.g. Højholt & Larsen, 2021). The common matter is in itself contradictory and researchers and co-researchers have different kinds of responsibilities related to different

aspects of the contradictions and different perspectives, experiences, and positions in relation to the research problem. The perspectives, tasks and working conditions of researchers and co-researchers in relation to collaboration therefore differ significantly. As such, the common matter is not to be understood as a consensus or agreement regarding how to approach a specific research problem, but as a theoretical and methodological point of departure in that knowledge can be developed through exploration of issues that are relevant (often in different ways) to the researchers and co-researchers.

In this way, the concept of *differences* plays a crucial role. A central question becomes: What can we learn about problems in social practice by engaging with people who have different experiences, perspectives, positions, and engagements in relation to the matter in question? On the one hand, this builds on the theoretical argument that people learn by dealing with differences across the different contexts that comprise their lives (Dreier, 2008, 2009). On the other hand, it relates to the conceptualization of collaboration as inherently conflictual: "There are contradictions involved in coordinating participants' acts around the common objectives. […] coordination and arrangement therefore have the possibility for conflicts; that they lead to what I call conflictual cooperation" (Axel, 2011, p. 61).

In a dialectical approach, conflicts can be conceptualized as part of historical processes and as an immanent potentiality that arises from people's engagement in collective but contradictory practices. This is a situated approach rooted in shared societal practice, where people engage in common matters from different locations, positions, and perspectives (Axel, 2011, 2020; Dreier, 2008; Schraube & Højholt, 2016). In this sense, differences (for instance in viewpoints and beliefs) are not just "coincidental" but can be analyzed as connected to how people participate in historical structures of everyday life, and

people can learn about common matters by exploring such differences. Exploring differences can be seen as an opportunity to learn about contradictions in social practice and how people deal with them (for instance, people often experience contradictions differently and deal with them in ways that lead to conflict). Thus, this understanding of conflicts alludes to differences as *interrelated* aspects through which researchers and co-researchers can learn about common matters – e.g., about structural divisions and historical contradictions in the practices they investigate. Hence, analyzing differences as connected in common matters is part of a collective approach to knowledge production – addressing the critique of studying other people as objects of research.

The above approach to research as conflictual collaboration calls for a continuous *decentering* of researchers' perspectives on research questions, designs, and methods, and for open-ended, varied, and flexible research processes. With inspiration from Jean Lave, to decenter research can be seen as to inquire from the perspective of the struggles and dilemmas of everyday life (Lave, 2019). This opens for an approach to exploring social problems as "wicked" problems – problems without clear delineations, causes or solutions (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Stam, 2011) – and not only focusing on different perspectives on such problems, but on the different ways in which problems are relevant to and constrain peoples' everyday lives. Therefore, rather than basing research on a set, predefined problem, the development of knowledge about the problem is intertwined with the research process itself. In the process of exploring problems and their contextual relations, researchers gain (theoretical) understanding of both the problems and the practices in which they are embedded – and develop concepts to help analyze such connections.
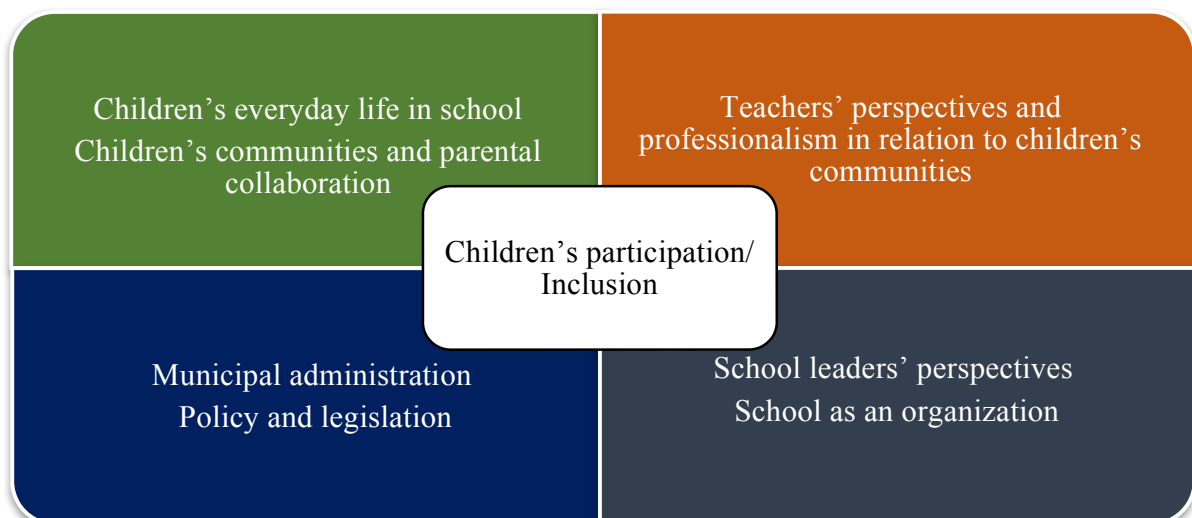
Design: Conflicts about children's school lives

In this section we outline the backdrop and idea behind the design of the research project "Conflicts about children's school life". By detailing the initial idea with the design and the dilemmas the researchers faced when starting the project, we hope to illustrate how we as researchers become part of conflicts in the fields we study and how we can learn from participation and collaboration – developing our theoretical understandings as part of such processes.

The aim of the project was to explore children's school lives through a focus on how the conditions for children's participation in school are distributed across several contexts that must be understood in relation to each other, and closely tied to the ways in which school is arranged as a societal practice. The project was organized in four different subprojects with a common focus on how to understand and support inclusion, understood as all children's possibilities for participation, engagement and learning in school – as illustrated in the model below.

Figure 1

Conflicts about children's school life

Children's everyday life in school Children's communities and parental collaboration	Teachers' perspectives and professionalism in relation to children's communities
Municipal administration Policy and legislation	School leaders' perspectives School as an organization

Children's participation/ Inclusion

The figure illustrates the focus of the four different subprojects and their interconnection through a common focus on how to understand and support inclusion/children's possibilities for participation

The researchers explored how various difficulties were manifested in schools (by following, respectively, children, teachers, parents, school psychologists, and school leaders) with a shared analytical objective of understanding how such difficulties are anchored in conflicts concerning the children (about how to understand children's actions, what kind of support is needed etc.) and the purpose of education (what children should learn, how different tasks should be prioritized, who should be included and in what ways etc.). The research started in 2014 after a political conflict centered on a reform of Danish public schools[3] and ongoing political discussions about the need for changes to the Danish welfare state. The idea of the design was to enable analysis of social conflicts situated in everyday practices in relation to historical and political struggles concerning the school as an institution.

Findings from several previous studies provided an important backdrop for the project's research design process: First, several projects have shed light on processes of *problem displacement* – such as when a child's difficulties in school are seen as caused by a particular "parenting style" (Højholt & Kousholt, 2019b), or problems in a class are attributed to "a bad teacher" or "weak management" (Mardahl-Hansen, 2018). In processes of problem displacement, complex social problems are displaced to categories of individ-

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3 The goals of the reform were to improve students' academic level and well-being and reduce the impact of social background. Three areas of action were identified to meet these goals: A longer and more varied school day with more and better teaching and learning; enhancing the skills and competences of teachers, educators, and school leaders; and developing clear goals and simplifying rules and regulations. https://www.uvm.dk/folkeskolen/folkeskolens-maal-love-og-regler/politiske-oplaeg-og-aftaler

ual deficits and competences – or to isolated relations (e.g. a defective relation between a teacher and a child) (Højholt & Kousholt, 2020). Second, analyses have suggested that conflicts within communities of children, as well as conflicts between the various adults, are crucial in relation to processes of problem displacement, showing how such social conflicts lead to *personal conflicts* and everyday dilemmas for children, teachers and parents (Højholt, 2022; Kousholt, 2018; Røn Larsen, 2018). In processes of problem displacement, the social and material embeddedness of problems is rendered invisible. Studies of cases where children have been referred to special help or given a specific diagnosis have shown that such social conflicts are seldom reported as an explicit part of the problem – instead, the focus is often primarily on individual students' behavior, deficits, and shortcomings, or on problems referred to as "a weak family background" (Højholt & Kousholt, 2019b; Kousholt, 2018.)

Building on this foundation, the project's design can be seen as an attempt to transcend or impede processes of problem displacement. In this project we particularly wanted to include a managerial perspective, since we had experienced that problems were often talked about as 'having to do with bad management'. Furthermore, the legislation concerning special educational needs appeared to be a central condition for collaboration across different institutions and professions, so we also wanted to include analyses of this legislation. The aim was to address the connections between different practices – but not as causal relations or questions of where the problem really lies – and to incorporate different perspectives and analyze differences as grounded and interconnected in structures of social practice. Thereby, we sought to explore conflicts about problems in school (how to name and understand them and, not least, how to intervene) as an integral part of the problems themselves.

In the research group, we shared a methodological frame of reference in the form of practice research and worked with ethnographically inspired methods. The researchers conducted fieldwork and interviews at the same three 'focus schools'[4] in order to share empirical cases. In practice, this meant, for instance, that the researcher following the everyday life of the school's teachers would at some point encounter the researcher following the children's school day, observing the same lesson: the former from a position near the teacher, the latter sitting among the children. This gave the researchers the opportunity to access different perspectives on what had transpired during this lesson, as well as different experiences over the course of the day.

Developing collaboration about common problems

In the initial phases of the research, the researchers were confronted with the often contested and conflictual ways in which research and practice are connected. In the sense that research can be used to evaluate, judge, and regulate practice, it can both be a powerful ally and a formidable adversary in struggles about how to develop practice. In this case, Danish public schools – as a central societal institution – had been the subject of numerous disputes and conflicts between different researchers, between different political visions, between researchers and teachers, and so on. As mentioned, a major school reform had just been implemented prior to the start of the fieldwork – a reform that had stirred up a lot of discussion, critique, and opposition from the teachers' union. The school reform

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4 The three schools were located in different municipalities (one school in the capital, the other two in mid-sized towns). Eight researchers participated in the project. The empirical material consisted of field notes from participatory observations (conducted by the researchers following, respectively, the teachers, the children, the parents, the school leader, and the psychologists) and interview transcripts. The research involved children through individual and group interviews (in some of these interviews, the dialogue was supported by the children drawing, producing 'social maps' of the class, 'walking tours' etc.)

was promoted as "based on research", which added to an already strained relationship between school research and school practice and made many teachers criticize research for judging school practice from outside without listening to the teachers (Mardahl-Hansen, 2018). The researchers faced this critique in a very concrete way when they started their fieldwork and met teachers who spoke disparagingly of researchers associated with the school reform and were skeptical of researchers in general. This exemplifies how the research project got caught up in ongoing conflicts about the school and between research and practice. In the beginning of the research process, steps had to be taken to actively go against "being those kind of researchers" in order to engage teachers in the research process in an open and constructive way. One might argue that the teachers had legitimate concerns about what their involvement in the project would mean – not only for them personally, but also for their colleagues: What kind of interests would be promoted, how would problems be labeled, and who would be held responsible? The teachers expressed a general critique of research as being conducted at a distance from their experiences and everyday lives, but nevertheless having a privileged voice in conflicts regarding their working conditions. The teachers were interested in taking part in the research when they learned that there was a particular focus on exploring everyday practices and problems at their school and understanding teachers' perspectives.

In collaborative approaches to practice research, researchers develop their position as participant observers in the field based on opportunities to develop access and collaboration – and to create knowledge together with co-researchers. This entails considering how specific problems in specific contexts offer specific possibilities for co-creation. Hodgetts et al. argue that collaborative research often involves developing "closer and more engaged relations" with co-researchers and operating "in more flexible ways methodologi-

cally" (2016, p. 141f). Such collaboration takes time – sometimes there is a need for several rounds discussing and adjusting expectations, working together to develop strategies for establishing a collaboration where the researchers can participate in and across different situations and contexts according to their research interests and where the co-researchers feel comfortable with the researchers' presence.

To offer another example of how the idea of the design developed as part of the collaboration and was not something fixed beforehand: Inclusion[5] provided a jumping-off point for the study but became a problematic concept during the research process. During the initial phases of the research, the researchers became increasingly aware that both the contradictory political discourse (Engsig & Johnstone, 2015) and the understandings of inclusion in everyday school life were part of the problems that the researchers wanted to explore. For instance, when the researchers initially talked about the research with teachers in terms of a focus on "inclusion", the teachers suggested that the researchers should conduct observations in a particular class because there were a lot of "inclusion kids" – meaning "children with behavioral problems". The word "inclusion" was hereby linked to individual children and furthermore often linked to frustrations about having too many children with "behavioral problems" in the classroom. Due to this dilemma, the researchers began to present the project in a different way, referring instead to children's participation in everyday school life and to differences and tensions between different perspectives and tasks in relation to the children. As part of this process and our ongoing the-

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5 Due to widespread concern about the increasing number of children referred to segregated special education, in 2012 the Danish government passed the so-called "inclusion act". The aim was to ensure that the vast majority of children (the stated aim was 96%) receive their education within regular classrooms. The implementation of this policy was a matter of intense criticism and debate, with one common critique being that it put teachers under greater pressure.

oretical work, we changed the original title of the project: from *Children's inclusion in school as conflictual collaboration between families, teachers, school leaders, and legislation* to *Conflicts about children's school life*. This change illustrates how the entangled processes of collaboration and ongoing theoretical work enabled us to formulate the shift in focus we argued for: from including individual children with 'special needs' in a homogeneous 'normal' school practice to developing conditions that support collaboration among heterogeneous participants regarding school as a many-sided and contradictory matter – which was in line with a general critique in the field of education concerning the individualization of school problems.

Building a research community with co-researchers

A general feature of practice research is to set up regular meetings where the researchers can discuss dilemmas in everyday practice with co-researchers. As part of the design, we arranged such meetings with professionals from the involved schools to explore and analyze the varying perspectives of the participants in relation to their different areas of responsibility, their conditions, and their knowledge of the children's school lives. In this section, we draw on notes and minutes from these research meetings and from recurring discussions in the research group to explore processes of collaboration.

During the project period, the researchers met regularly to discuss the progress of each subproject, the empirical material, and the research meetings with the co-researchers. During such discussions, it often became clear that the researchers following, respectively, the children, teachers, school leaders and psychologists had very different insights into everyday practices during lessons and breaks and were able to bring different experiences and stories to the table having followed the different parties. In this way, the researchers were continually reminded that psychologists, school leaders, researchers etc. have differ-

ent knowledge about the compound everyday life of the school. As each researcher primarily learned about the problem from a particular perspective and felt solidarity with the challenges and suffering involved as seen from this perspective, sometimes an immediate reaction was to assign blame to other parties.

However, to develop the research design in a way that was able to transgress the aforementioned gap between research and practice while making an effort to explore the many-sided problems of children's school lives in a decentered way, the researchers needed to avoid allying themselves solely with a particular standpoint. The research design supported the aim of transgressing the displacement of problems in a quite practical way since the researchers found themselves confronted with how different everyday school life looked when seen from different perspectives – and how these perspectives could be analyzed as substantiated in social conditions of specific tasks and in conditions for collaborating in and about school life.

A central concern when organizing the collaboration between researchers and professionals was to accommodate the raising of different viewpoints and to analyze differences and disagreements as grounded in school as a conflictual matter. Therefore, it was a central part of the design to build a research community where the researchers and various professionals from the different schools (teachers, pedagogues[6], school leaders, and psychologists) could meet and exchange their thoughts about and experiences during the research process, and present and discuss dilemmas from everyday school life. At these meetings, discussions were organized as "rounds" where everybody took turns in present-

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6 A 'pedagogue' is comparable to what in other countries is termed 'pre-school teacher', but is in Denmark a separate education and profession The aforementioned school reform also entailed that pedagogues (who had previously primarily been based at after-school centers) became more involved in the school as 'school-pedagogues', for instance collaborating with teachers regarding the well-being of students.

ing examples and reflecting on dilemmas from their current work situation. Furthermore, the design of the project was discussed – the focus for the researchers' participatory observations during their fieldwork, who to interview next, and so on. The researchers following the children provided (anonymized) examples from observations that brought the children's perspectives on the everyday life of the school into focus – their engagements, social interplay, and conflicts. These examples were then discussed in relation to the professionals' general experiences with, for instance, changes in the social dynamics in a class, as well as in relation to the intentions, tasks, and responsibilities of parents and professionals.

During these meetings, we also discussed different themes that emerged as important for all parties during the research process (e.g., children's communities and the school's collaboration with parents). A central part of the meetings was exploring specific examples that were brought up during the rounds to learn about concrete dilemmas that appeared to be significant for both everyday life in the school and for the researchers' concern with different perspectives on various problems. Such collective analyses provided interesting and often surprising insights into how everyday life at a single school – and even a particular incident – could look very different from different perspectives. In addition, such examples provided insights into important conditions, changes, and challenges within everyday practice at the school.

As mentioned, organizing research as a collective and collaborative process that involves participants as co-researchers is about striving to conduct research that is better able to deal with issues of relevance to the practice that is being studied, allowing the researchers to benefit from the co-researchers' involvement and knowledge and from mutual curiosity. In this way, research collaboration is not about achieving agreement, but about

learning from differences and disagreements (Højholt & Kousholt, 2019a). For example, problems can appear and be expressed in different ways: What teachers might regard as a problem with discipline in the class, parents might attribute to a failure to differentiate teaching to match individual children's needs, while researchers might focus on different (implicit) understandings of the respective tasks and responsibilities of teachers and parents in relation to the school.

During many years of conducting practice research, we have often discussed the importance of the more practical organizational matters of developing research communities with researchers and professionals – and also how they are often underestimated or even overlooked. Such discussions need to be framed in such a way as to transgress traditional positions and divisions – e.g., designating the researcher as the "expert" and the professional as someone who "implements research". We therefore planned and facilitated the meetings in ways that actively challenged or resisted such divisions – for example, making efforts to create a level playing field for dialogue by ensuring that everybody had an opportunity to talk about something that was important to them from a position of knowledge (such as describing experiences from their own practice). This is not intended as an illusory endeavor to create a "room without power" or ignore our positions as researchers, but as a strategy to counter the unequal structures and positions and the hierarchical concept of knowledge (and thereby address – on a practical level – the critique raised at the beginning of this article that scientific and abstract knowledge is positioned above concrete knowledge rooted in everyday life). To this end, the researchers discussed numerous times how the meetings should be organized – e.g., when school psychologists and school leaders should be present at meetings with teachers and pedagogues and when to arrange separate meetings, because the presence of leaders and psychologists tends to affect dis-

cussions due to their positions and tasks in relation to the other professionals. We also organized workshops where the participants could discuss various questions in smaller groups. Sometimes these groups were divided according to profession (teachers in one group, pedagogues in another group, and so forth), which provided opportunities to exchange experiences from different schools and to explore commonalities and differences in working conditions etc. On other occasions, the groups were mixed (teachers, pedagogues, psychologists, and school leaders in the same group).

At the meetings, the researchers took part in the rounds in the same manner as the professionals, outlining their work conditions and the challenges they faced. The researchers also took part in the group work and shared their experiences and dilemmas. Often, co-researchers were not previously aware of the conditions for conducting research and assumed, for instance, that the project was a full-time activity for the researchers. However, as employees at universities, such projects are just one of a wide array of tasks that frame the researchers' involvement. In addition, members of a research team can have quite different conditions – some without permanent employment – with contradictory demands that influence their participation.

Most meetings took place at the schools and afterschool centers and were combined with a 'tour' of the school, allowing both researchers and professionals to get an impression of the different schools (which varied quite a lot in terms of size, architecture etc.). Some meetings took place at the university. Both researchers and professionals valued such opportunities to experience each other's workplaces and see the differences in conditions (for instance, in classroom size or the amount of space for outdoor activities). This also gave rise to reflections on the significance of such differences – not only for the children's school lives, but also in enabling and limiting collaboration.

The researchers shared an ambition of democratizing research practice and developing the research group as a community where we supported each other in our different tasks related to the common research endeavor. This involved reflecting on the concrete organization of the research and working with concepts that transgress hierarchical dualisms. In our experience, the concept of conflictual collaboration centered on a many-sided common matter has the potential to support an exchange of perspectives in a joint analysis where it is precisely the differences between participants that contribute to knowledge and understanding of the problems that the research is about – and hence contribute to theory development. Paradoxically, employing conflict as an analytical concept may make disagreements less threatening.

The concept of conflict as a vehicle for multi-perspective analyses

In the above examples, we have reflected on links between the practical organization of research and possibilities for collaboration and collectivity during the research process. In the following, we explore how the concept of conflict functioned as a theoretical vehicle for the analyses using material from our meetings and exchanges with co-researchers – material where the researchers play an explicit role. We focus on some of the dilemmas researchers may face when conducting collaborative research. In this way, we illustrate how the concept of conflict helped drive the analyses and how, simultaneously, those involved developed their understanding of the concept. We reflect on our theoretical work on conflicts during the research project as something that developed in and through collaboration in practice – and thereby highlights the development of theory as a social process. Working with the concept of conflict encouraged us to focus on both the differ-

ences and the connections between different perspectives, positions, and tasks and thereby to analyze the varying perspectives on the children and the school while considering their interconnections. Theoretical inspiration from, among others, Axel and Ollmann was crucial in this process (Axel, 2020; Ollman, 2003, 2015). Analyses of the different and often contradictory perspectives that are part of an engagement in a common matter deepened our understanding of social conflicts. Additionally, working with the concept of conflict offered us analytical potentials for transgressing artificial gaps between research practice and everyday practice, between historical conflicts and situated conflicts, between so-called micro and macro processes etc.

In this section, we also address how to deal with different experiences and understandings and with processes of problem displacement – challenges we try to transgress conceptually as well as in our research design. During the research collaboration, there were frequently concrete dilemmas regarding how to deal with different understandings among participants at the meetings, or with the researchers' sense of indignation when, for instance, professionals problematized and categorized children or parents in the very ways that the researchers sought to overcome.

At one of the last meetings – in this case with teachers and pedagogues from the involved schools – some of the professionals talked about the organizational challenges arising in connection with a temporary move to school buildings in another part of town while their school was being renovated, highlighting how it presented difficult conditions for both students and teachers. This included reflections on how some children seemed to struggle with the transitions and confusing conditions leading such children to be regarded as problematic – a situation that was further exacerbated by the general pressure everyone at the school was under due to the turbulent situation. Such reflections were in line with

the researchers' efforts to include socio-material conditions when analyzing school problems. Adding to her account at a previous meeting, a pedagogue talked about a recent merger between a special school and the school where she worked. From her perspective, the merger had negative ramifications for both students and teachers. She had initially looked forward to working in the special class, however she described the work environment as "very, very tough" and stressful. She left the special class and was assigned to a new 1st grade class. She also experienced this new class as "very challenging", referring to various groups of children within the class as highly problematic – as "extremely challenged and challenging" – and detailing what she saw as the causes of these problems, for instance describing a child "who rules the roost at home" and does not accept the teachers' authority. She described another child as "living in his own little world with no sense of propriety" and reflected upon how she and her colleagues neglected the quiet children in class when spending all day "putting out fires". This pedagogue obviously felt very frustrated and pressured, utilizing individualizing and categorizing language about the children within her narrative when talking about her situation.

The researchers' found that this problematizing way of talking about children was not questioned by the other professionals during the meeting – even though it contradicted statements made earlier in the meeting exploring children's actions in relation to their conditions when analyzing school problems. The course of the dialogue illustrates that divergent understandings of problems coexist within professional practice in schools. But how should researchers respond to such a contravention of the project's approach? Such statements offer rich potentials for analysis and further inquiry. Later in the meeting, one of the teachers stated that "child cases are more of a burden than they used to be". She referred to things she had been told by the school psychologists, concluding that the children "need

more support, guidance, and special help". For a while, the discussion at the meeting was centered on whether the current stressful conditions in the Danish school system produce more "problem children", with others underlining that there have always been children that do not fit in. At one point, one of the researchers responded based on her own experiences: "I have worked within this field for 40 years and for this entire period, people have talked about the children getting more and more difficult – how difficult can they get? I do not believe it! I think professionals are under pressure". This statement opened the debate and inspired others to outline different standpoints about how to understand 'school problems' and 'children's problems' – and, not least, how to understand the relation between everyday school practice and children's personal difficulties and suffering.

Both during and especially after the meeting, the researchers grappled with and sought to make sense of these conversations. The researchers talked about how to maintain a stance of curiosity and openness when encountering contradictory and provocative statements from co-researchers. The same critique that the researchers raised – that the professionals thought about the children in individualizing terms – can be leveled at the researchers if such discussions end up with a particular professional being labeled problematic.

The above-mentioned challenge prompted the researchers to analyze how problematizing categorizations are part of practice and concern central issues that school professionals need to deal with. It also encouraged us to challenge our sense of indignation through curiosity, asking questions such as: What makes such categorizations and generalizations meaningful? What are the conditions that encourage such ways of understanding and talking about children? Through analyses, posing such questions may lead to a critique of ways of organizing school life and conditions for working with problems in

school. The many perspectives represented in the design were helpful in such processes, encouraging us as researchers to move beyond individualized understandings and to analyze the conditions for the different understandings of the problem. In this way, the critical and collective analyses helped illustrate that people can apply individualizing categories in one situation and express nuanced understandings of social conditions in another, and that understandings change and are changeable – related to concrete social conditions in processes of, for instance, unresolved conflicts and resignations (see also Højholt & Kousholt, forthcoming). The different knowledge the researchers could contribute to discussions (from following different groups) and the shared commitment to exploring conflicts as part of common matters were crucial in allowing us to transcend feelings of indignation or judgments of the professionals and to remain open and curious in our analytical approach. This in turn demands an open and trusting relationship among the researchers – transgressing (formal and informal) hierarchies due, for example, to different positions within academia. Similarly, Restler et al. point to how facilitating poly-vocal and collective analyses involves paying attention to the "tensions of working together inside of and up against the individualized and individualizing structures of academic systems and institutions" (2021, this volume p. 26).

The insistence on involving professionals as co-researchers during the research process thereby becomes a somewhat practical question of how to continuously organize the collaboration to overcome such dilemmas and learn from each other by analyzing different perspectives on the contradictory problems at the core of the research collaboration. To exemplify how dilemmas such as the above can spur researchers to further explore the conditions for individualizing understandings of school problems, we draw on another example:

In a workshop organized with teachers, the focus was on everyday conflicts and how the teachers dealt with them. The researchers were quite surprised by the teachers' stories of frequent social conflicts, which they saw as an ordinary part of everyday life at their schools and as something that it was part of their professional role as teachers to solve. The teachers described a wide range of strategies for dealing with such conflicts, transgressing traditional mono-contextual presentations of teachers' tasks and profession-alism. These included strategies transgressing the classroom, the academic tasks, and the relationship between teachers and their students by involving other children, other parents, and other contexts (for instance, extracurricular activities), such as in efforts to create bet-ter social conditions for children who feel lonely at school. When asked if there are in-stances where they cannot solve such conflicts (because the teachers' stories gave the im-pression that teachers are able to solve every conflict that may arise during everyday school life while the researchers were used to hearing about irresolvable problems), one teacher answered: When the problems threaten the teaching – when it becomes impossible to teach. Another added: When the collaboration with others (e.g., parents, school leaders, colleagues, and other professionals) breaks down. One teacher explained: When the prob-lems stem from another context – when the problems come from the family – then there is nothing we can do.

The statements from these teachers gained a quite central position in the re-searchers' analyses since they illustrate *conditions* for social processes among different parties. Their possibilities for accomplishing their tasks, for coordinating their efforts, and for understanding the difficulties seem key to their approach to and understandings of the children. Returning to the dilemma regarding how to understand school problems that arose at the first meeting, it becomes clear how sensitive the different understandings of

school problems are for those involved: Their approaches to the problems are related to their experiences of agency, their self-understanding – and their sense of powerlessness. Furthermore, their understandings have consequences for the everyday processes of exploring a given problem and of collaborating and involving different perspectives. The conditions for exploring and dealing with problematic situations seem to affect the positions open to other parties – whether as (part of) the problem or as having legitimate perspectives and knowledge. Moreover, the professionals' experiences of having different lines of action at their disposal are significant conditions for how problems can be understood, and for collaborating and changing problematic situations.

Individualizing and scholastic understandings are part of school problems; as researchers, we became preoccupied with exploring when and how such understandings become dominant. The categorical understandings and displacements of problems are not associated with certain persons or groups of persons – rather, they seem to be part of processes with restrictive conditions and limited action possibilities at stake – processes characterized by unresolved conflicts and "mutual resignation" (Højholt & Kousholt, 2018). In this way, the analyses accentuate how different understandings of problems are related to conditions for collaborating on various tasks. When people experience a limited range of possibilities for action and their interplay is characterized by a sense of powerlessness, curious and open exploration and dialogue concerning these problems is in jeopardy.

Analyzing the interconnections between different perspectives on a common matter that is contradictory and conflictual gives rise to new ways of understanding the context of a problem. Rather than the immediate impetus to differentiate between people based on their approach to the problems, we argue that it is imperative to explore the *reasons* why those involved adopt a particular approach and to analyze the *conditions for*

their understandings. Through their continuous collaboration, researchers obtain insight into subjective reasons for actions and into (often contradictory) conditions for taking part in and performing different tasks, and for dealing with the dilemmas that arise in the social practices of which they are part. Exploring people's reasons can direct our attention to the conditions for actions and social interplay and thereby enhance analyses of contextual connections. In this way, researchers can contribute to analyses of the conditions and processes of problem displacement instead of 'othering' some of their co-researchers, thereby gaining new insights into how conflicts and conflictual understandings develop – and how they may be changed.

Theorizing in practice through collaboration

This article began with a problematization of divisions between theory development and everyday social practice, and of scholastic approaches that clearly demarcate different kinds of activities and different kinds of participants within research processes. We have outlined some elements of how the development of a community comprising both researchers and professionals – including working with collective multi-perspective analyses – can transgress conceptual and organizational divisions between theory and practice and move beyond the idea of isolated, decontextualized knowledge production.

In our analyses, we tried to illustrate how we as researchers participate in and are part of the conflicts we study within practice – regardless of whether we explicitly address our involvement. We sought to explore this connectedness and show how we can learn about and from different positions and perspectives with respect to the situated dilemmas of everyday school life. The multi-perspective and cross-contextual design prevented the displacement of the problems to another context or participant since the researchers gained insights into the reasoning and conditions of those involved. The researchers had to

strengthen the analyses to understand the *conditions* for the different understandings of a problem, as well as the processes and conflictual collaboration of which it is part. In this way, the project's design, empirical material, multi-perspective analyses and theory development are linked.

The researchers worked with theory development by collaborating with professionals with various kinds of responsibilities and tasks in relation to the conflictual practice of the school, and by sharing preliminary analyses with each other and with co-researchers. Conceptual analyses are an integral part of the social processes involved in research. In this way, the different aspects of research must be seen as interlinked – and can be considered aspects of subjective everyday orientation and ways of dealing with problems.

Transgressing methodological criteria objectifying both "informants" and researchers requires reflection on the very concept of knowledge. The illusion of objective, impartial knowledge beyond social practice and as a "view from nowhere" often continues to result in a mystification of research processes. As such, this scholastic approach to knowledge is part of the problems we analyze in our research (and an example of how research practice is part of other practices). In the conflicts concerning how to understand difficult situations in children's everyday lives, the various parties are not positioned on a level playing field. Some kinds of knowledge are not considered legitimate (e.g., from persons "too involved" in the problems, from everyday experiences, from persons categorized in certain ways etc.).

We have discussed practice research as a transmethodological approach that offers an opportunity to transgress this hierarchical approach to knowledge production. As researchers, we can explicitly strive to democratize research and involve different perspectives. That is not to say that knowledge from previously disregarded perspectives contains

"the truth", but such knowledge is essential in developing an understanding of the problems or issues being studied (see also Khawaja & Mørck, this volume). Researchers need knowledge from everyday life – from the perspectives of the children who are problematized, the parents who are categorized, and the professionals involved in these processes – if they are to analyze social problems as many-sided and "wicked".

By analyzing ongoing theorizing in practice, we have sought to contribute to the discussion of scientific quality and the concept of generalizability based on praxis theory (Axel & Højholt, 2019). Working with the concept of conflict helped us in this process. Analyzing conflicts as outlined above drew our attention to contradictions in social practice – the issues we dealt with are full of dilemmas that participants must navigate each day, continuously striving to manage contradictory and incompatible elements in their activities (Axel, 2011). This focus on contradictory but nonetheless interdependent aspects of a common matter offers an opportunity to move beyond the individualization and displacement of problems. When conflicts become deadlocked, those involved may experience themselves as isolated from and in opposition to each other and feel threatened by each other's incompatible interests. However, conflicts are tied to a shared engagement in the problems that must be dealt with. Taking such an approach shifts the focus of research from individual incompetence and limited understandings to the *conditions* for finding workable ways of collaborating or for experiencing entrenched opposition and deadlocked conflicts (Højholt & Kousholt, 2020).

Theories are often understood as a set of a priori concepts to be applied both in research and in practice, but theories do not guarantee intelligibility. As pointed out in Goulart et al.: "Theories are subjective resources used to produce intelligibility on the world and, precisely because of this subjective character, they configure our world, not

representing something external to be used in a timely manner and only on certain occasions" (Rey, 2014, p. 17 cited in Goulart et al., 2021, p. xx).

We have exemplified how concepts can be analytical resources in (collaborative) processes of generalization. This implies a concept of "the general" as consisting of differences and continual change. Through analyses that anchor situated conditions in historical social practice, we can gain an understanding of general connections, interplay, and processes. By using such terminology, research can incorporate human subjectivity and everyday life in the production of knowledge and develop situated, subjectivity-and-context-based generalizations in an attempt to overcome superficial and one-sided ways of understanding problems (Schraube & Højholt, 2019). We argue that this should be done explicitly and systematically – rather than legitimizing qualitative research through modified positivist criteria, as discussed in the introduction to this article. As such, the contrast is not between theory and practice, but between whether we approach problems from a singular and purportedly objective position or by openly investigating and exploring contextual connections in social practice (Axel & Højholt, 2019; Højholt & Kousholt, forthcoming).

By anchoring conflicts in their historical connections, researchers can insist on *analyzing* the conflicts instead of getting stuck in ideological polarizations of different aspects and considerations. Such analyses can point to the contextual interconnections related to the problem that is being investigated and identify relevant social conditions that can support collaboration and agency. As such, research collaboration and conceptual development can offer possibilities for developing professional practice.

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