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Analysis in action research: Four analytical propositions for how to think with the ethos of action research

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This article explores analysis in action research as a philosophical question. Action research has a strong normative standpoint in the form of an ethos of social justice, empowerment, and democracy. It not only produces critical analyses but also contributes productively to the formulation of alternatives. Based on our position within Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR), this article explores how the methodological, ontological, epistemological, and normative characteristics of action research might be brought into research analyses, and we formulate four propositions that we argue should shape the analytical work. These propositions are: Humans are knowledgeable and capable of analysis; Humans are capable of formulating structural critiques; Practices are unfinished experiments; and Practices contain potentialities. The article aims to engage in dialogue with colleagues from across qualitative research traditions in order to create increased transparency about the different philosophical underpinnings that guide research analyses in different fields.

Keywords: Critical Utopian Action Research; Analysis; Philosophy; Ethos; Democracy

Introduction and research question

For many years, we have worked as action researchers in the field of education inspired by Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR). We have worked in many different settings (kindergartens, schools, local communities and workplaces) and with many different groups of participants (young children, refugee youth, professionals, municipal actors, etc.). Across our projects, we have aimed to produce research knowledge about local processes and the society of which they are part, and which constitutes an important context for understanding the local issues. In addition, we have been concerned with creating changes together with participants that not only aim at practical improvements

but at the good life.[1] Thus, we identify with the normative orientation of action research towards social justice and democratization (Nielsen & Nielsen, 1999, 2006, 2016; Reason, 2002; Bladt & Tofteng, 2023; Frandsen & Egmose, 2019; Gunnarsson et al., 2016; Husted & Tofteng, 2019; Meyer-Johansen, 2002).

Developing and engaging in participatory methods is complex and demanding. Therefore, methods are often a central focus of action research literature, where many discussions center on ethical and methodological challenges, the development of sensitive methods, and strategies for creating and sustaining change (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006a; Alrø & Hansen, 2017; Gleerup & Engmose, 2022; Jensen, 2019).

In recent years, we have become increasingly interested in the fact that the defining traits of action research are not only methodological but also linked to the analytical work (see also Thingstrup & Lind, 2025). In our experience, analyses in action research share some characteristics that are not always made explicit. This makes it difficult for new action researchers to acquire the craft of analysis as well as for researchers from other theoretical traditions to understand the analytical endeavor. We therefore believe that there is a need to make explicit—and critically discuss—what analysis in action research is about and on what philosophical understandings it builds.

Analysis does not refer to a particular phase in the research process, but to a special dimension of the knowledge production process where empirical data and concepts are separated and reassembled into new units of meaning, creating new connections and insights. Existing literature on qualitative research analysis mostly focuses on practical, methodological, or technical dimensions of analysis. It emphasizes processes related to coding, data condensation, systematization, the establishment of analysis categories, representation, etc. (Mottelson, 2024; Bundgaard & Mogensen, 2018; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2017). These questions – though relevant and important – are insufficient.

Since qualitative empirical material is characterized by complexity and openness, the analytical focus and knowledge interest is not given. Rather, processes of systematization and interpretation require that some focus points are prioritized, while others are excluded (Bundgaard & Mogensen, 2018, p. 75). These decisions entail

[1] Working with "the good life" is an attempt at creating a broad horizon for the discussion of ambitions for change, and a way of bringing multiple perspectives together. "The good life" is thus a way of posing questions rather than a way of finding solutions or answers.

philosophical questions about truth and ethics, and it is important to make these explicit and open for discussion.

The aim of this article is to discuss these philosophical dimensions of analysis in relation to action research. Starting from our own tradition, we discuss the philosophy and ethos that characterize action research and how these might shape key analytical questions and focus points (Brydon-Miller, 2008; Tofteng et al., 2014; Tofteng & Husted, 2012). The article explores how the methodological, ontological, epistemological, and normative characteristics of action research might shape the analysis.

The article opens with a brief description of some fundamental characteristics of action research across traditions, focusing on normativity, methodology, ontology, and epistemology. Next, we present key theoretical and philosophical traits of the tradition that we ourselves are part of, namely, Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR) (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006; Gleerup & Egmose, 2022; Husted & Tofteng, 2019; Bladt & Tofteng, 2023). In the main part of the article, we formulate four analytical propositions that we argue grow out of the ethos of our theoretical position and shape our analytical work. We show how they are linked to some basic understandings of our action research position, and we show how they shape the analysis, illustrated by empirical examples from our previous research projects. In the concluding section, we reflect on the strengths and limitations of our findings and discuss perspectives for future research.

What characterizes action research

> Action research is a democratic and participative orientation to knowledge creation. It brings together action and reflection, theory and practice, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern. Action research is a pragmatic co-creation of knowing with, not about people (Bradbury, 2015)

In this section, we describe what we believe to be key characteristics of action research across traditions. This description forms the starting point for our reflections on what should characterize analysis in action research.

Action research is a well-established and vibrant field of research, which is interested in the connections between research and change. The field is characterized by a versatile theory base, philosophical innovation, and methodological creativity (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998; Bradbury, 2015). Action research uses

participatory methods and is based on a strong normative approach to empowerment, social justice, and democracy (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2016; Wulf-Andersen, et al. 2015). Action research critiques the notion of research as disengaged and thus research ideals of neutrality and objectivity (Lewin, 1946); It has an ambition to involve multiple participants in the research and change process (Frimann & Hersted, 2020; Jensen & Eikeland, 2020), and aims to contribute to addressing practical problems (Hiim & Stålhane, 2018; Winther & Høgsgaard, 2020).

Thus, the concept of change is fundamental. Action research not only contributes with special types of empirical findings or theoretical innovation but pays particular attention to methodological questions (Egmose et al., 2020). In action research, critical reflections on the implications and limitations of methodological approaches and processes play an important role, because research explicitly intervenes and engages in the processes, therefore clearly being a co-creator of the collective processes that it studies (Phillips et al., 2018). Therefore, action research is analytically interested not only in empirical phenomena and processes, but also in the contexts in which the empirical phenomena and processes came into being, how they changed, and how the research was co-creative, as well as ethical issues intertwined in the methodological approach (Burns, 2018). This means that many action research analyses include relatively comprehensive descriptions of the research process (cf., e.g., Karlsen & Larrea, 2014) as well as critical, complexity-seeking analyses of participatory, change-oriented work (Thingstrup & Lind, 2025).

In the following, we describe action research in terms of key philosophical traits relating to normativity, methodology, ontology, and epistemology. Although we recognize that different action research traditions have a different emphasis, we believe that these issues constitute some basic orientations.

A normative research tradition

Normatively, action research has an ambition of contributing not only to critical, deconstructing analyses, but also to positive formulations of alternatives (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006). This means not only improving social phenomena but also contributing to social justice and democracy in a broader sense (Wrentschur, 2021). Striving to conduct research with (and not only about) people, action researchers believe that people

affected by a problem should have a voice in the formulation, exploration, and resolution of the problem (Winther & Høgsgaard, 2020). This is especially expedient when it comes to marginalized groups, e.g., ethnic minorities, children, women, and the socially excluded (Neidel & Wulf-Andersen, 2013; Gunnarson, 2016; Burns, 2018), and there is an ambition that participants develop new empowered (practice) orientations and experiences.

There is a strong ethos of opening the research space to other forms of knowledge and experience than those represented by researchers, as well as recognizing the voices of diverse groups as valid contributions to research. Hence, many action researchers carry out collaborative analyses with participants (e.g., Johansen, 2017, p. 65; Bladt & Tofteng, 2023; Burns, 2018).

Methodologically, this raises questions on determining how to identify and recruit participants. It becomes important to develop participatory methods that respect the forms of knowledge, modes of communication, and living conditions of the participants (Hagemann, 2025; Dixson et al., 2018). To some, this calls for methods that might activate bodily, sensory, or emotional forms of knowledge, e.g., through aesthetic or playful processes (Jungk & Müllert, 1984; Jensen, 2019; Lind, 2020) For example, when cooperating with small children, the methods should not be too verbal or dependent on writing (Husted & Lind, 2016) and, if cooperating with newly arrived refugees, the methods should take the participants' linguistic resources into account (Thingstrup et al., 2017).

Ontologically, action research understands the world as fundamentally dynamic and is interested in social phenomena as emerging, i.e., in a process of constant becoming. Social phenomena (such as institutions, attitudes, hierarchies, etc.) are not static facts or things, but rather processes that constantly change through negotiations, interpretations, practices, and struggles (Lundqvist et al., 2025). These social processes are characterized by openness and unfinishedness (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006a, 2016; Nielsen, 2024). It is, therefore, not given that they must work as they currently do. Rather, they are characterized by a certain level of contingency (Meyer-Johansen, 2002). A more radical ontological implication is that the experiments and non-actualized potentials of social phenomena should also be analytically regarded as something that has existence. In other words:

> Reality is understood not only by studying the realized and the actual, but also by studying the unrealized and the possibilities that open up in social processes of creation, but which for various reasons were not unfolded. (Thingstrup, 2012, p. 49, our translation)

Epistemologically, action research understands knowledge production to be fundamentally engaged and participatory. Social phenomena are always situated, and knowledge of social phenomena is always partial, positioned, and practical (Phillips et al., 2022). Thus, action research is based on a critique of the notion that knowledge can be neutral and objective. In action research, people are understood as having different knowledge about social phenomena in their lives, and the knowledge creation of action research takes place in collaboration between people who have different kinds of experiences with and knowledge of the social phenomena (Bladt, 2014; Frimann et al., 2020; Winther & Høgsgaard, 2020). Similarly, the researcher is understood as socially positioned and embedded in social practices (Skjervheim, 1996). Social processes are characterized by participation and changeability, and this also applies to research. The researcher's subjective position and involvement in research processes is thus not a source of error to be corrected, but a basic condition for human cognition.

Critical Utopian Action Research

Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR) is the research tradition we work within. The tradition was developed in Denmark in the 1980s (Nielsen et al., 1999; Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006b) and draws theoretical inspiration from critical theory, action research, social learning theory, future research, and critical psychoanalysis (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2016; Gleerup & Egmose, 2022; Schwenke et al., 2021).

CUAR is concerned with everyday life, which is understood as a junction between societal structures and subjective and collective agency, where both oppressive and liberating processes take place. Like other action research traditions, and in continuation of critical theory's critique of science, CUAR holds that research should contribute to democratizing processes and that research itself should be characterized by a democratic ethos. In other words, CUAR is a normative research tradition based on an emancipatory knowledge interest (Egmose et al., 2020), implying a preoccupation with developing new understandings of society, working with the good life as a horizon. The basic question

that underlies both research and change is thus: *How do we want to live?* In relation to change processes, this means that focus is never solely on practical improvement, but that changes should always be considered in the perspective of everyday life and analytically understood as an orientation towards the good life as a collective, unfinished, inevitably contradictory phenomenon (Hagemann, 2025).

A fundamental characteristic of CUAR is that, methodologically and philosophically, it combines critique and utopia (Junk & Müllert, 1984; Paaby et al., 1988; Egmose et al., 2020). The exploration of utopian horizons is combined with critiques of the limitations of everyday life, enabling a critical and imaginative distance to everyday life as well as an empirically based social critique that opens the local situation for analyses of general conditions (Thingstrup, 2012; Lind, 2021).

Reification is a key concept in CUAR (Nielsen, 2004). It refers to the fact that reality appears to us as a static, fixed phenomenon—an objective reality. However, reification is never complete: reality is constantly changing and moving, and thus, ambiguous and unfinished. The interest of CUAR is, therefore, to examine the social world as a contingent phenomenon that exists in a tension between reality and potentiality (Ahrenkiel et al., 2012).

Within this tradition, research typically starts with a collective process of critical analysis with the participants, often with methodological inspiration from the Future Creating Workshop (Jungk & Müllert, 1984). Central to these workshops is the exploration and critique of the participants' everyday lives and the social reality with an objective of formulating and realizing experiments that explore the possibilities for alternative practices. This part of the research process is collective and includes a focus on creating changes and improvements for the participants in their everyday life, leisure, work, etc. Change work is initiated and studied as part of the research, typically with an attention to both the democratic development of society and the general development of knowledge (Nielsen, 2024).

Four analytical propositions that grow from the CUAR ethos

The analytical ambitions of CUAR should be understood in relation to the starting point in an emancipatory knowledge interest. The research and analysis is, therefore, always

aimed at democratization and empowerment, and thus also at the possibilities for learning in the research work.

Analytically, CUAR is interested in insights and change initiatives that are launched during the research work, in the interaction between participants and researchers, and the general and abstract learning that may be drawn from this. Further, there is an interest in the democratization processes that unfold in, through, and around the research process itself (Nielsen et al., 1999; Nielsen & Nielsen, 2016; Husted & Lind, 2016, Tofteng & Bladt, 2022). This entails an analytical exploration of research as a (potentially) democratic space in its own right, insisting on the democratization of knowledge production. In CUAR, it is therefore important to analytically explore whether and how research itself opens for democratizing or anti-democratizing (instrumentalizing and colonizing) processes:

> By creating an inclusive, democratic culture in the action research process itself, it opens the way for participants to achieve a subject status and begin to take responsibility for their own lives – as a counterpart to methods where people are objectified and where their participation in the creation of new knowledge is instrumentalized for research or practical purposes. (Gleerup & Egmose, 2022, p. 61, our translation)

The ethical and normative starting point (Bryden-Miller, 2008; Tofteng et al., 2014; Tofteng & Husted, 2012), however, goes beyond the research processes. In the following, we formulate four analytical propositions that grow out of the philosophy and ethos of CUAR. The four propositions are: Humans are knowledgeable and analytically capable; Humans are capable of formulating structural critiques; Practices are unfinished experiments; and Practices contain potentialities. We use empirical examples from our research to illustrate the analytical implications. The examples are chosen because they represent findings in our material that are typical and recurrent but do so in a particularly condensed form.

Humans are knowledgeable and analytically capable

The first proposition relates to how action research views humans as knowledgeable, interpreting, meaning-making subjects, whose understandings and practices are rational and competent, and who are able to understand themselves. (Skjervheim, 1996). The analytical implication of this ethos is that the analysis pays attention to the insights the participants have about their own lives and explores how these are subjectively meaningful. In addition, the analysis should also be interested in the participants' knowledge of the situations and contexts of their lives. It should acknowledge that people contribute important insights about social situations, institutions, structures, and processes, because their positioned insights provide important knowledge about these as lived phenomena in an everyday context.

We illustrate these points with an example from an action research project on well-being in early childhood education, which methodologically combined Future Creation Workshops, participant observations, and interviews (Lind, 2019). The following excerpt stems from field notes from a kindergarten:

> Susan sits on a stool and looks a little tired, there are many children around her, and they push and pull the door. I [Unni] say that I hope they will have a good afternoon. Susan looks at me and says: "It will be okay, but there's a little pressure," and she continues when I say that it seems calm, that it's probably also because she's in the middle of it and knows that it feels a little pressured. (Lind, 2019, p. 193, our translation)

The situation unfolds after lunch in the cloakroom of a kindergarten, where the pedagogue,[2] Susan, helps some children (3–5 years old) put on their outerwear so they can go to the playground. The researcher, Unni, enters the cloakroom. Her impression of the situation is that it is calm and characterized by a good atmosphere—in contrast to some of the previous situations she has experienced in the kindergarten, where there were more noise and bustle, and where she felt that everyone was under pressure. The

[2] In Denmark, pedagogue (*pædagog* in Danish) is a distinct welfare profession, working within a broad range of fields and with different groups (infants, school children, people with special needs, elderly). In contrast to teachers who work with a more academic focus, pedagogues work with a broad orientation towards socialization and well-being related to everyday life in a societal perspective (see Cameron & Moss, 2011; Jensen, 2011).

conversation between Unni and the pedagogue, Susan, looks at first sight just like an informal conversation, starting with Unni kindly wishing the pedagogue a good day. However, the ensuing exchange of words shows that there is more at stake than that. The pedagogue's comment that "it will be okay," even though she is under pressure, can be seen as an expression of her questioning whether it will be a good afternoon. At the same time, drawing on her experiences, she says that she believes it is going to be okay, and she mobilizes the energy and attitude that she needs to make this happen. When Unni says that the situation seems calm, it can be seen as a way to present her outside view of the situation and encourage the pedagogue to elaborate. The pedagogue's response—which follows a contemplative pause—is an acknowledgment as well as a challenge of Unni's observation. The pedagogue tells Unni that she understands why the researcher sees the wardrobe as calm, because the bodies are calm, and the sound level is moderate. However, Susan challenges the analysis of the situation by drawing attention to what she knows about the situation, "because she's in the middle of it," namely, the mental and organizational processes that take place at the same time, making the situation anything but calm for her.

Susan's reflections point to some dimensions of the kindergarten that cannot be seen by simply observing the interactions, but which require her engaged knowledge as well as her knowledge of the multiple processes, prior conversations, and organizational logics.

The situation should be understood in light of the many conversations Unni has had with the pedagogues before and after this brief exchange, where the pedagogues have explained that the work is about practicing professional, pedagogical calm and presence (which is exactly what Unni senses), but that this work presupposes and carries many organizational tasks and tensions for the pedagogues. This and many similar exchanges illustrate that the pedagogue has a deep understanding of the situation and her own position in it. Furthermore, the exchange illustrates that the pedagogue understands the researcher's analytical perspective on the pedagogical situation and that she engages in this analysis. Her analyses—along with a number of similar conversations in workshops and everyday life—contributed to the research project's development of new theoretical understandings of early childhood education that linked organizational, everyday life, and

working life perspectives; analyses that could not have been made without the active analytical contribution of the pedagogues (Lind, 2019).

This illustrates one ambition of CUAR analyses: to not only consider participant statements as expressions of how social processes shape or are shaped by humans. This would be viewing the subject as passive products of social relations (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2005, p. 171) that they either reproduce or resist. Rather, CUAR views people's statements as analytical contributions and asks what they might teach researchers about social processes, institutions, and contexts. Research analyses are thus closely linked to the analyses that people themselves can make of their situation.

This also means that theoretical and analytical perspectives cannot be defined categorically in advance (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006, p. 348) but should be developed in dialogue with the analytical perspectives that the participants point to in order to understand how social processes, institutions, and contexts are expressed as life contexts and lived experiences.

Whereas this proposition focuses on people's ability to understand their own lives, the second proposition takes the recognition of people's knowledge further, encompassing their ability to formulate understandings and critiques of the structural level.

Humans are capable of formulating structural critique

Our position in CUAR is based on a belief in ordinary people and their ability to understand and take responsibility not only for their own lives, but also for common affairs (Nielsen, 2024, p. 414). Although humans always experience and create knowledge about social processes from a particular social place and specific life contexts, they are not limited to only understanding or taking an interest in their own lives. Rather, humans are able to understand the society, institutions, and structures they are a part of. This means that researchers, with an analytical distance and a theoretical eye, are not the only people who can understand and analyze structural, societal, and general issues.
We are critical of research approaches where humans:

> […] are portrayed as individuals who are rarely fully attentive to the meaning and consequences of their actions (Steensen 2014:23) [which leads to a tendency

> for] a reductionism in the theoretical analyses. This tendency is characterized by an interpretation of all human behavior as manifestations of unconscious relations of power and dominance, where [the subjects'] experiences, agency, and opportunities to relate reflexively to the issues of which they are part are not explored. (Steensen, 2023, p. 53, our translation)

The analytical implication of this ethos is that the analysis should take an interest in the statements and practices of participants as an expression of the fact that they stand in an active, reflective, and critical relationship to the structures of which they are a part. The analysis should explore how people's statements and actions are expressions of particular understandings of the structural conditions and of efforts to explore their possibilities for agency within these.

We illustrate these points with an example from an action research project on cooperation between teachers and pedagogues[3] in primary school (Danish: *folkeskole* 'folk-school') soon after the implementation of a school reform in Denmark. Methodologically, the project combined workshops and participant observations (Thingstrup et al., 2017). The following empirical excerpt records a conversation during a break in a workshop:

> In the break of the workshop, the teacher Linda comes over to [two of the researchers] and says: 'These discussions are very abstract. We don't have any time for those kinds of discussions after the reform. It is all controlled very tightly by the school management, it is very measurement oriented. What happened to the FOLK-school? There is a lot of top-down management about goals that are predefined, and little or no space to discuss the overall educational rationales, and what we want with our professionalism. There IS no FOLK-school any longer. So, we are told by the management what to do, like performing 0.3% above national average. Why is it 0.3? And what if we can't? But there is no room for that.' (Thingstrup et al., 2017, pp. 8–9)

[3] Since pedagogues and teachers (as mentioned above) are two distinct professions in Denmark, cooperation between these professions in primary school open for interprofessional struggles and professional demarcations. These dimensions will not be discussed here.

This workshop took place some time into the project. At this point, pedagogues and teachers had reflected together on their collaboration, their different roles at the school, and the purpose of their work. During the workshops, the participants had expressed conflicting attitudes to the purpose of the school: One kind of attitude was in line with the reform's increased focus on academic learning and performance; another kind of attitude expressed a desire to create a school with a broader educational purpose and with room for diversity and democratic processes of experience. There was a slight tendency for teachers to put forward the first kind of attitude and for pedagogues to put forward the second kind of attitude. However, it was just as interesting that teachers and pedagogues both expressed themselves in both ways at the same time. Linda was one of the teachers who had positioned herself as academically ambitious, in line with the reform, but in the conversation above—during a break—she criticized the reform for dismantling the "FOLK-school" because it disconnected school from culture and society and erased democratic discussions of the normative aim of education.

We read this as an expression of the fact that Linda (as well as her colleagues) tried to formulate professional practices based on their existing place within the actual institutional context, while also struggling with these logics and formulating critiques (Thingstrup et al., 2017). The critique was directed at the structures as constituting limitations, but it can also be read as self-critique, i.e., a critique of their own practices within these structures. If the analysis had focused only on Linda's statements at the workshop, or on the different statements as expressions of different positions among colleagues, the analysis would have missed the complexity and reflexivity entailed in the statements.

Thus, inspired by CUAR, our analyses are interested in subjects' statements and actions as a form of immanent structural critique: When we read people's statements and practices as critique and self-critique, we see them as attempts to explore and challenge perceived disempowerment and create an increased space for agency. We also see that they can be understood as efforts to develop practices that are better—not just in terms of self-interest, but in terms of engaging with the complex question of a good society (and in this case, the good school) as a collective issue. This capability for social critique, however, does not exist as a ready-formulated, finished critique, but rather develops and

evolves continuously. This leads us to the third proposition about the processual nature of the social.

Practices are unfinished experiments

Within CUAR, we understand social reality as constantly changing, ambiguous, and unfinished (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006b, 2016; Nielsen, 2024). Statements and practices are thus understood as expressions of processes in which people continuously struggle, negotiate, and find ways to understand, create meaning, and live meaningful lives.

An analytical implication of this is that any analysis should explore people's practices and statements as unfinished experiments. These experiments take place within concrete and complex life contexts and should be seen as concrete responses to these. The analysis should build on an interest in how people explore different possibilities that address different dimensions of reality and in people's life orientations.

We illustrate these points with an example from an action research project on multicultural education in primary and lower secondary school, which combined development workshops, future workshops, and participant observations (Thingstrup, 2012, 2015).

At the first meeting with the participating teachers, the researcher (Signe) initiated processes to collectively formulate the focus and problem of the project. Among other things, she initiated a brainstorm under the headline "Challenges in the work with ethnic minority students." The teachers' statements were written down in condensed form as keywords on large pieces of wallpaper. The keywords were:

> Vocabulary; Cultural differences, Basic knowledge, Little conceptual knowledge; Identity problems; Implicit expectations, General knowledge (e.g., fairy tales and history); Parenting culture – relation between freedom and control; Parents' ways of life – inherited isolation; Pupils' and parents' lack of participation in social relations; Difference in norms – understanding of the teacher's role; Different understandings of the role of the school; Parent–teacher-cooperation – linguistic problems; Children don't share a language with their parents; Teachers' lack of knowledge about children's and parents' culture;

> Insecurity about communication – siblings as translators. (Wallpaper notes; see Thingstrup, 2012; Lundqvist et al., 2025)

One analysis of the keywords might state that they represent a deficit view of minority students and a lack of recognition of their knowledge (Smith, 2020). In addition, some of the keywords point to stereotypical and generalized notions of minority parents' culture and life situation. Only a few of the keywords point to the teachers' difficulties or role in the challenges, while the rest point to students and parents as the problem. In this way, the keywords reflect some of the findings of research in multicultural pedagogy, racialization, and institutional racism (Smith, 2020; Clarke & Vertelyté, 2023), namely that teachers reproduce hegemonic notions of "Danishness" as a norm. In their reified version, the statements can be analytically read as racializing and monocultural interpretations of a complex situation. However, this would not capture our understanding of social reality as constantly changing, ambiguous, and unfinished.

Therefore, our analysis does not stop there. By understanding the keywords in their immediate context (the specific question from Signe), as well as their broader social context (a school where Danish language and culture dominate), the keywords can be read as contingent answers, i.e., as reflections of the school in its existing form and of the teachers' existing institutional position, identifying with existing logics of teacher work (Thingstrup, 2012, p. 208).

During other conversations during the project, the teachers themselves challenged and relativized these keywords: They expressed frustration and disempowerment because they felt that they failed in their work with minority students, and they expressed a commitment to the students' success. Considering the empirical material in its entirety, the teachers' keywords can be seen as tentative readings and as experiments with interpretations. These experiments can be analyzed as responses to a specific situation—not just the specific question at the meeting during the research project, but also the school at which they work. They also express self-critique and critique of the school they co-produce, being unable to meet the needs of minority students. Here, their longing for more appreciative, equal, and successful interactions with minority students and parents emerged. Interpreting the teachers' statements as expressions of deficiency views on students would be a reification of something that should rather be understood as an

unfinished experiment and explored for the implicit and explicit critiques and utopias about teachers' and students' lives at school.

In a broader sense—and building upon the understanding that researchers and participants are not fundamentally differently placed in the world—this also means understanding humans as people who continuously and tentatively explore and experiment. Analytically it is thus about looking for the ways in which people themselves formulate an awareness of the inadequacy of their statements and practices. This illustrates an ambition of CUAR analyses to establish humbleness towards the fact that understanding the social world in new ways is a huge and complex task for researchers and participants alike. This ontological view of practices as contingent and unfinished has implications for our understanding of how analyses of empirical processes can contribute normatively to processes of change by pointing to the existence of potentialities. This leads us to the fourth proposition.

Practices contain potentialities

With inspiration from critical theory, CUAR is oriented towards repressed or as yet unformulated possibilities for the future (Gleerup & Egmose, 2022; Bladt & Tofteng, 2023; Nielsen & Nielsen, 2015: 118) in terms of democracy or emancipation. This orientation is reflected as an analytical interest in participants' own search for alternatives and for "the good life"; a search which has empirical reality in itself. The ethos of CUAR suggests that research analyses search especially for democratic potentials in the empirical material that can contribute to the development of new understandings of problems and society. As such, emancipation is always concrete and individual (in the form of people's wishes for their lives) but also relates to broader questions of the general human condition, and the analytical attention is directed at the utopias and beginnings that people express. The analysis should be open and curious towards the participants' aspirations, experiments, and analyses.

We illustrate these points with an example from the previously mentioned action research project on well-being in early childhood education (Lind, 2019). The following excerpt stems from an informal conversation in a kindergarten between the researcher, Unni, and a pedagogue, Lise, who meta-reflects on her work. The conversation takes place after she has participated in a Future Creation Workshop.

> When you have a good overview of things, and things are well planned, they [the children] get super fun, sweet, free adults who have plenty of time, and who can do all sorts of things. And my opinion is that children should primarily be surrounded by adults who have plenty of time. Children shouldn't be—and they are, in fact, most of the time, after all—they are actually surrounded by adults who are busy. (Lind, 2019, p. 199, our translation).

In Unni's observations and workshops, Lise seems a pedagogue under pressure, distanced from the children and sharp in her tone towards children and staff, as well as towards the researcher. In this conversation, Lise emerges as a different kind of adult than Unni had previously experienced.

Here, Lise formulates the utopia for her and the children's everyday life as a wish that the adults would be "super fun, sweet, free adults who have plenty of time, and who can do all sorts of things". This statement opens the analysis and makes it possible to see little cracks—the potentiality and the multidimensional conditions of possibility that are present in everyday life. Lise's statement is initially aimed at a critique of her and her colleagues' ways of being present in the kindergarten, and it is followed by reflections on how the staff's absent and busy interaction with the children might be understood and experienced by the children.

Here, she appears as a knowledgeable subject who understands herself and the context in which she acts, and who has an awareness of the structural and organizational conditions of the work and her own practice. In addition, Lise's reflections point to potentialities and utopias. She formulates some visions for the good life that emerge as a collective good life, and with the emphasis on *free*, it becomes possible to spot the emancipatory notions, albeit tentative, that exist in everyday life, and which seem to be evoked during the Future Creation Workshops and the dialogues and interviews with the staff about well-being in kindergarten.

The analysis should focus on the subjects' insights, and the tentative formulation of openings and horizons of possibility while, at the same time, exploring how the specific and the local are societally mediated. Although reality appears, to some extent, as reified (as an everyday life where people live in repressive, unsatisfactory, or alienating ways), the subjects' tentative formulations and explorations of what the good life might be are immanently present in the material.

Conclusion – discussion and perspectives

This aim of this article was a philosophical discussion of analysis in action research. While much action research literature focuses on methodology, this article explores the analytical dimensions of action research, discussing what analytical questions and focus points might follow from the philosophical and normative position of action research. From our position within Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR), we formulate four closely intertwined analytical propositions that we argue should shape the analytical work.

The first proposition is that people should be understood as knowledgeable, interpreting, meaning-making subjects, whose understandings and practices are rational and competent, and that theoretical and analytical perspectives should be formed in dialogue with the analytical perspectives indicated by the participants. *The second proposition* is that people are capable of formulating structural critiques, including critiques of their own ways of acting within these structures, and that the analysis, therefore, should understand the subjects' statements and practices as attempts to explore their conditions and make increased room for agency. *The third proposition* is that human practices should be understood as expressions of unfinished experiments in an ever-changing world, and that the analysis, therefore, should be interested in practices and statements as tentative responses to concrete and complex life contexts. *The fourth proposition* is that all practices contain potentialities and that the analysis, therefore, should focus on people's exploration of what the good life might be, because these explorations contain openings for change.

These propositions are shaped by our work within a particular empirical field and a particular cultural setting (education in a Nordic setting) and by the complexities that characterize this context. Although we have attempted to formulate the propositions in ways that transcend our own position, we are fully aware that the context and position from which we write shapes not only the examples we have used, but the very way we think about the propositions. We strongly believe that analyses should be developed in relation to the specific field of study and problem they deal with, and we hope that our analytical propositions and their practical implications will be explored, challenged, and further developed by researchers who work within other contexts.

However, in the article we have argued that analytical decisions relate not only to the empirical context, but also—crucially—to the fundamental knowledge interests, philosophical groundings, and ethoses of the theoretical positions held by the researcher. As such, our propositions are shaped by our particular research position in CUAR, and they would have looked different if they had been formulated by researchers in other action research or participatory research traditions, who— though agreeing with us on the participatory ethos—might foreground other epistemological or ontological foundations.

Many action researchers have argued that action research is an approach that aims to formulate new criteria and standards for research (e.g., Eikeland, 2007). We argue that our belief in subjects as knowledgeable is not a naïve position, but an expression of a philosophical position. The recognition and value of the knowledgeable subject and the analytical capabilities of participants is an important philosophical issue to discuss, not just within action research, but across research fields.

We believe that these philosophical questions about analysis and interpretation deserve a more prominent place in international research discussions across disciplines, and that these discussions are relevant not only to participatory research but to qualitative research in a broader sense. No analysis is neutral, and different qualitative research traditions work from different philosophic principles of "good" interpretation and analysis practice, whether these are explicitly formulated or not. The formulation of the four analytical propositions grows from our Nordic research position but is an invitation to colleagues around the world, from different empirical fields and research traditions, to discuss with us what quality and criteria in research analyses might be, and to create a larger degree of transparency in the international research community about the philosophical understandings that guide our analyses.

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