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*Published in:*  
Nordic Studies in Education / Nordisk Pedagogik

*DOI:*  
[10.23865/nse.v43.3985](https://doi.org/10.23865/nse.v43.3985)

Published: 01/01/2023

*Document Version*  
Final published version

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*Please cite the original version:*  
Salo, P., & Rönnerman, K. (2023). Educational action research for being. *Nordic Studies in Education / Nordisk Pedagogik*, 43(1), 78-93. <https://doi.org/10.23865/nse.v43.3985>

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## Educational Action Research for Being

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### ABSTRACT

The article describes the characteristics of educational action research on the basis of its development in three Nordic countries, namely Sweden, Norway and Finland. The characterisation begins with a reflection on the Anglo-Saxon variants of action research within education. Thereafter follows a democratic and participatory conceptualisation of action research identified through a description of its formation within working life practices. This conceptualisation is traced back and interpreted in terms of *bildning*, collective pedagogical practices within *folkbildning* and in relation to *pedagogik* as a basis for teachers' professional knowledge base. The characteristics of educational action research are encapsulated as action research for being.

**Keywords:** *educational action research, collaboration, participation, bildning*

### On educational action research

Educational action research consists of a broad family of complementary research approaches, strategies and methods for understanding and developing social practices within education. Since the 1950s, variants of educational action research have been developed both as a response to changing historical, cultural, social and political circumstances and with the intent to emphasise specific aims, methods or outcomes (Eikeland, 2020; Langelotz & Olin, 2022, pp. 1–2; Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. xxii). Our focus is delimited to collegial and collaborative forms of action research conducted in educational institutions and schools that aim to enhance professional learning

Manuscript received: 15.06.2022. Manuscript accepted: 28.01.2023.

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Citation: Salo, P. & Rönnerman, K. (2023). Educational Action Research for Being. *Nordic Studies in Education*, 43(1), 78–93. <https://doi.org/10.23865/nse.v43.3985>

and school development. This interest is based on two decades of engagement in the Nordic Network for Action Research (NNAR), bringing together researchers and practitioners within the field of education from Sweden, Norway and Finland. NNAR has been developing and researching action research practices, often through comparative case studies, in various local and national educational settings. This pragmatic research orientation combined with a cross-national collaboration has resulted in the following definition of Nordic educational action research:

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

Quite early on, NNAR became engaged in an international research program, Pedagogy, Education and Praxis (PEP). It included a group of researchers from Australia and the United Kingdom, including Stephen Kemmis and Wilfred Carr representing the Anglo-Saxon tradition and conceptualisation of educational action research, and from the Netherlands, with Petra Ponte providing a continental perspective. Collegial conversations and emerging collaboration within the international network on concepts, traditions and practices related to educational action research have inspired us to reflect on and make meaning of the action research practices that we have been engaged with in Sweden, Norway and Finland. This self-reflective activity includes the historical-political context by which our professional aims and ambitions regarding educational action research have been formed. (e.g. Kemmis et al., 2014; Salo & Rönnerman, 2014). Our pragmatic and development-orientated research interest has been completed with a collaborative hermeneutical endeavour that aimed to identify the historical predecessors of and influences on educational action research in the three Nordic countries.

Firstly, we traced the unarticulated overall aims of our action research practices to the ideal of *democratic bildung* (e.g. Gustavsson, 2013) and *folkbildning* as a designation of various social movements with specific features from the different Nordic countries. Since the late 1900s, *folkbildning* (*folkeoplysning* in Danish and Norwegian, *vapaa sivistystyö* in Finnish) has aimed to enhance social, cultural and societal development by furthering human growth and collaborative learning in the context of constructing a national identity and citizenship, within the framework of civil societies and welfare states (Korsgaard, 2000; Siljander, 2007). Secondly, we identified the practice of *study circle democracy* (Larsson, 2001) as a precursor for the experience-based and collaborative knowledge construction characteristics of our action research practices. Thirdly, our focus was on teachers' professional learning and school development, reflected by *pedagogik* as a way to provide teachers with a scientific base and professional knowledge through which they will be capable of enhancing the social goals of teaching and education.

On the basis of implementing and developing educational action research in the three Nordic countries, being engaged in a reflective conversation with the Anglo-Saxon tradition and making meaning of educational action research in terms of *bildning*, *folkbildning* and *pedagogik*, our hypothesis is that the Nordic tradition and practices of educational action research, as expressed in Sweden, Norway and Finland, are characterised by the following:

1. Openness to and recognition of different experiences, perspectives, identities and values, expressed in various forms of knowledge;
2. Equal, reciprocal and horizontal relationships, resulting in organic partnerships between professional practitioners (e.g. from school and university);
3. Democratic, deliberative and knowledge-informed development and decision-making;
4. Being process-driven over time and recognising participants' needs, resources and pace;
5. Engaging in collective responsibility and purposeful action for enhancing individual and professional growth within various organisational, social, cultural and political contexts.

The aim of the article is to examine and re-interpret the characteristics above and, by doing so, continue with a self-reflective conceptualisation of educational action research as a research and development practice in the context of three Nordic countries (e.g. Rönnerman & Salo, 2017).

To review our understanding of educational action research, we begin by sketching a historical overview of the development of the Anglo-Saxon variants of educational action research. In our interpretation, educational action research within the Anglo-Saxon tradition has evolved mainly as a method for improving educational practices and methodology for substantiating improvement in a scientific manner. We then offer a short account of the origins of action research in the three Nordic countries. This is done by describing how the sociotechnical and interventionist Anglo-Saxon action research within working life organisations was transformed by emphasising the democratic and participatory aspects in democratic dialogues and co-generative learning (Gustavsen, 2002; Elden & Levin, 1991). Thereafter, we return to the educational traditions and practices in the Nordic countries as expressed in the complex notions and concepts of *bildning*, *folkbildning* and *pedagogik*. Lastly, we reformulate our understanding of educational action research in the three Nordic countries by describing it as *action research for being*, in contrast to its Anglo-Saxon equivalent, which we denominate as *action research for doing*. We relate our hermeneutical endeavour, a collaborative intellectual undertaking, to *bildning* in the sense of 'the arduous art of knowing together', which Sverker Sörlin (2019) formulated several years ago.

## Anglo-Saxon Traditions of Educational Action Research

In the following, we sketch the early development of educational action research in the Anglo-Saxon domain as a backdrop for explicating the features of educational action research in the Nordic countries. We do so as a way to clarify how education and action research are and have been influenced by the Anglo-Saxon traditions not only of education in general but also of action research.

Stephen Corey, at Columbia University in the United States, is identified as the initiator of educational action research. In his article, 'Action research to improve school practices' (Corey, 1953), he maintained that '*teachers, supervisors, and administrators would make better decisions and engage in more effective practices if they were able and willing to conduct research as a basis for these decisions and practice*' (Abstract). Corey (1954, p. 375) saw action research as a means for educationalists to improve their professional practices and solve educational problems by using scientific methods. The reliance on practitioners' ability to conduct research stems from Dewey and American pragmatism and progressivism in the early 20th century, emphasising teacher inquiry as means of testing and applying educational theory into practice (Edward-Groves & Rönnerman, 2021, pp. 49, 58).

Since Corey's introduction of educational action research, it has been an object for criticism, often with reference to its legitimacy in terms of methodology (e.g. Hodgkinson, 1957). In an attempt to substantiate educational action research as a trustworthy methodology, Kenneth Zeichner and Susan Noffke (2001) presented an overview of the traditions of *practitioner research*, which is action research initiated and conducted by practitioners themselves. They began with Corey's implementation of Kurt Lewin's (1946) action research principles and practices in schools. The second tradition was the *teacher-as-researcher movement* in UK from the 1960s onwards, which rose as a response to student disaffection and teachers' engagement in restructuring and reconceptualising curricula at the local level. Lawrence Stenhouse (1975, p. 143), one of the proponents of the movement, claimed that it is not enough to study teachers' work; teachers also need to study their own work. Teachers' capacity for systematic reflection on their professional practice and focus on a teaching-learning process rather than outcomes were identified as prerequisites for pedagogical change. Action research was to enable teachers to transform their local practices to comply with their professional ideals (Zeicher & Noffke, 2001, p. 5).

The *North American teacher research movement* in the 1980s, which engaged teachers in collaborative research with university researchers (Zeicher & Noffke, 2001, p. 6), was influenced by a wider acceptance of qualitative methods, teacher's initiatives in developing teaching and Donald Schön's (1983) conceptualisation of the reflective practitioner. *Self-study research* represented an extension of the teacher research movement to colleges and university faculties, and especially to teacher education. It developed qualitative methodologies for studying teaching practices in light of teachers' life histories and disseminating research by writing articles. *Participatory action research* grew out of a need to empower local groups and movements for social change.

It began with adult education and literacy programmes in Latin America and Africa and dealt with various social issues with the aim of overcoming oppression. Its epistemological base relied on dialogue as means of defining problems and constructing knowledge (Fals Borda, 2006, pp. 27–28; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001, pp. 8–9).

Influenced by these movements, Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis developed an epistemological basis for emancipatory action research. In their view, action research was not only to develop educational practices but also to improve rationality and justice in social situations related to the practices. In *Becoming critical – education, knowledge and action research* (1986), they presented a comprehensive argument for action research as a critical social science. They identified, based on Habermas's knowledge-constitutive interests, three forms of action research: technical, practical and emancipatory. Emancipatory action research reaches beyond functioning as a method for improvement. It represents a commitment to develop practices as forms of interaction that jointly form social and educational relationships (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, pp. 204–205). When asked to reconsider their contribution twenty years later, Carr and Kemmis (2005) claimed that action research had become detached from its emancipatory aspirations and transformations, and had become an institutionalised model of in-service training and a research method for teacher and school development (p. 351).

Action research as a methodology for conducting research and as a method for improving educational practices has been the subject of ongoing debate. The aim of reinforcing action research as a methodology, with its principles and practices of gathering, analysing and compiling data to improve professional practices, is manifested in a range of books, such as *Action research a methodology for change and development* (Somekh, 2006) and *The action research planner* (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Somekh and Zeichner (2009) explored how action research had been used in educational reform and remodelled in local contexts. By focusing on the aim of action research and its function from a societal perspective, they identified five forms of action research, namely that it is (a) used in times of political upheaval and transition; (b) used as a state-sponsored means of reforming schooling, (c) co-opted by governments and school systems to control teachers, (d) a university-led reform movement and (e) a means of locally sponsored systematic reform sustained over time.

The Anglo-Saxon history of educational action research contains various complementary traditions and practices, methodologies and methods that should be considered when reflecting on it from the perspective of the Nordic countries. In our reading of it, educational action research appears increasingly to be a method for complying with expectations and requirements external to teachers' work and professional practices in schools.

## **The Early Development of Action Research in Nordic Countries**

The sociotechnical strand of Anglo-Saxon action research, formed by Kurt Lewins's rational social management approach and characterised by involving workers in the

development of work-related problems, was found to be deficient in terms of dissemination and long-term effects. It relied on a unidirectional relationship between theory and practice, and workers' involvement was of a technical nature. When imported to Norway and Sweden in the late 1960s, it was embedded in democratic and participatory societal and organisational soil. Established democratic practices between employers' associations and trade unions enabled the development of comprehensive field experiments and promoted the dissemination of experiences and results within working life organisations. Employers' participation and engagement in decision-making enabled a redesign of working processes and conditions in a collective and democratic manner. The democratic and participatory principles and practices were of joint interest for all labour market parties and enabled joint learning to become an integral aspect of action research (Eikeland, 2012, p. 269; Greenwood & Levin, 1998, pp. 20–27).

Björn Gustavsen's (2006) work in Norway is significant in terms of developing action research as both a method and a practice. He introduced the concept of a mediating discourse to cover the ground between theory and practice. This was done by emphasising the practical importance of communication in identifying problems and development needs, presenting and testing ideas for improvement and generating new actions and practices. The focus was on communication practices concerning change rather than striving for a certain kind of rationality. Action research thereby evolved as an arena and method for systematic collaborative learning. Consequently, the procedures for how to deal with an issue were foregrounded on behalf of its content. Gustavsen's (2006) criteria for democratic dialogues read as follows:

All concerned have the possibility to participate, obligation to be active and support each other.

Participants have an equal status and their work experiences form a point of departure for the dialogue.

All arguments represented by the participants are of value.

Arguments brought forward must be scrutinised and handled deliberatively, and decisions are to be based on a collective investigation.

The dialogue relies on reciprocal communication and aims to generate decisions for joint action. (p. 19)

Gustavsen's compatriots Max Elden and Mårten Levin (1991) presented similar ideas to democratic dialogues when they introduced their variant of action research, *co-generative learning*. It was framed within the societal values of democracy, equality and social justice and rejected the ideals of researchers acting in a value-neutral manner. Co-generative learning builds on participants and researchers' participation in a co-generative dialogue with the aim of co-constructing a local theory to be tested through collective action. Knowledge is thereby understood as context bound. Researchers

follow up actions based on a local theory with the aim of applying them to a general theory.

This revision of principles and practices for action research coincided with various development projects in working life organisations. During the 1970s, *research circles* were established at Lund University in Sweden as a response to a crisis within the shipbuilding and car industries. They provided union representatives and researchers with a flexible form of coming together to discuss a wide range of matters, from handling industry shutdowns to enhancing democracy in the workplace (Nilsson, 1990). The national Leading–Organization–Codetermination (LOM) programme in Sweden in the 1980s built on democratic dialogues in local learning environments and large-scale networking. It emphasised dialogue and networking between various types of collaborative arenas as core aspects of organisational development. With the LOM programme, action research developed from small-scale experimentation within companies and communities to large-scale networking projects at a regional and national level (Gustavsen, 2002; Hansson, 2003). In Finland, action research in working life evolved in the late 1980s with various projects within the quality of working life programme with the aim of collaborative developing new modes of operations for work within a sustainable working environment (Kasvio, 1994). These projects were followed by Yrjö Engeström (1996) establishing *developmental work research* as an application of cultural–historical activity theory. This can be described as a change strategy based on combining research, practical development work and training.

## **Educational Action Research in the Nordic Countries**

The participatory and democratic practices of action research developed in working life organisations, have since the 1990s been customised for educational action research. Compared with the Anglo–Saxon traditions this happened quite late. In our view this is due the historical orientation towards *bildning*, enhancing human growth as well as reliance on the collaboratory learning processes characteristic to *folkbildning*. The ideals and practices of action research were already in place, embedded in the development of civil societies and welfare states. Eikeland (2020) describes the development of action research as a transition from local societal development via work life science to educational action research with an emphasis on the professions and professional learning. The first action research projects in Norway were realised in the early 1970s in the Lofoten region. Being influenced by a radical turn in the social sciences, researchers at the University of Tromsø (Arctic University of Norway) engaged teachers, principals and community members in accommodating content, teaching materials and practices according to local needs (Ekholm, 1989, p. 11). In Sweden, educational development blocks were introduced in the 1970s as an attempt to establish practices for local school development in collaboration between researchers and practitioners (Lindblad, 1982). In Finland action research was conducted within community development, apart from the



work by Marja-Liisa Schwantz, who had since the early 1970s been involved in large rural development programmes in Tanzania, within the Anglo-Saxon participatory action research tradition.

Decentralisation of comprehensive education in Sweden, in the early 1990s, established action research as a practice for professional learning and school development. This coincided with the introduction of a goal-steered curriculum, with emphasis on the local conditions for development and strengthening teaching as a profession. By underlining the importance of collaboration with researchers, action research was found to be an approach for complying with the conditions and demands identified on a local level. Collaboration between universities and schools were supported by government funding. Some of the early action research projects were conducted in collaboration with researchers in the United Kingdom (Axelsson, 1997). In Finland the decentralization of curricular work from 1985 onwards, engaged teachers in collaborative development work beyond their classroom work. The scope of teachers work expanded and the concept of 'teachership' was established. It refers to teachers as autonomous professionals developing their work with the aim of furthering human growth and societal development (Johnson, 2006, pp. 33–37). The 1990s were characterised by an expansion of educational action research in line with the British teacher-as-researcher tradition (Ojanen, 1993). The early action research projects focused on the use of computers for developing teaching and student-centred working methods (Suojanen, 1992, pp. 64–65).

In Norway Tom Tiller turned to action learning, focusing on organisations, and establishing a program for in-service training for teachers, with an emphasis on content and methods for school development. Tiller (1999, p. 62) refers to action learning as a continuous collegial process of learning and reflection for improvement. It relies on teachers and principals' everyday professional experiences and needs, to be refined in a collaborative, knowledge-informed and deliberative manner, as within the practices of *folkbildning*. Over the last two decades, action research has been widely used and acknowledged in local, regional and national school development projects in Norway (Furu & Stjernstrøm, 2017, pp. 169–170). It builds on a strong and organic connection to research and universities. Government funding and steering have promoted the development of educational action research. Educational action research has expanded in alignment with the development of the welfare state's interests in education and teaching profession, accompanied by a strong professional trust in schools and teachers.

A similar development has been taking place in Sweden, where the government in 2015 established a new agency, the Swedish Institute for Educational Research. The institute aims to enhance the competence of teachers and educators in the Swedish school system to plan, carry out and evaluate teaching, in an evidence-based manner, using research-based methods and procedures in collaboration with universities. Recently another similar body of funding was launched. The Development, Learning, Research (ULF) project focuses on practice-close research (*praktiknära forskning*),

with the aim of laying a foundation for long-lasting collaboration with researchers for research-based development in schools (Langelotz & Olin, 2022).

In Finland the development of educational action research has, beyond the teacher-as-researcher tradition, been characterized by a sociotechnical interventionist approach aiming to develop schools as organisations. From 2000 onwards, educational action research has expanded and become diverse in terms of contexts and research interests.

The Nordic Network in Action Research was established in 2004 as a joint arena for action researchers from Sweden, Norway and Finland (Rönnerman et al., 2016). Since then, it has refined a common understanding of action research principles and practices through joint research publications (Rönnerman et al., 2008; Rönnerman & Salo, 2014), establishing an annual conference at which practitioners and researchers can meet, exchange experiences and reflect on ongoing action research.

### **The Nordic Context – *Bildning*, *Folkbildning* and *Pedagogik***

In our view, educational action research in all of the Nordic countries is formed by the ideals, traditions and practices of *bildning* and *folkbildning*, developed and refined in the process of constructing welfare states in which civil society functions as an arena and education is a means for realising the ideals of democracy, equality and justice. The ideals and practices of *bildning* and *folkbildning* are intertwined with the early development of *pedagogik* as a science of upbringing and a basis for teaching as a profession. *Pedagogik* has two complementary functions; it provides teachers with both a scientific base and professional knowledge, through which they are capable of enhancing the social goals of democracy, equality and justice. The three dimensions of action research within the Anglo-Saxon tradition, namely personal, professional and political (Noffke, 1997), have in the Nordic context been realised in an organic manner by engaging fellow human beings in dialogue, providing lifelong learning opportunities for employees and paying continuous attention to public arenas for the realisation of active citizenship.

The reference to the Nordic traditions of *bildning* and *folkbildning* requires some clarification. While *bildning* was developed in Germany and France to nurture a social and cultural elite, in the Nordic countries, its orientation towards common people, or *folk*, became more popular. The early development of *folkbildning* in the respective Nordic countries had a common orientation but different emphases, forms and expressions. On the one hand, it evolved in the form of spontaneous and collective learning practices permeating education, social work and culture; on the other hand, it was characterised by the establishment of educational institutions supported and funded by the state. A reciprocal yet tension-filled relationship between local grassroots-level interests and initiatives and a national steering of institutions continues to assert itself (Gustavsson, 1996). Even though *folkbildning* is often related to and conceptualised within the German tradition of *bildning*, Korsgaard (2002) argued that it was also harmonised with the Anglo-American tradition, as constituted within various

social movements. These movements aimed to enhance the sovereignty of the people by emphasising an organic connection between collective knowledge construction and social and democratic development.

The concept of *folk* has two complementary points of reference. As a cultural category, it refers to a collective identity, a community with specific characteristics, a sense of belonging and a common cause. Consequently, *bildning* is understood as a process of finding one's own roots and way of life. As a political category, *folk* refers to community members (citizens) championing the establishment of a democratic form of social life (civil society) in which empowered subjects are engaged in public decision-making based on the free and inclusive exchange of views. Accordingly, *bildning* refers to the self-initiated collective process of searching for knowledge based on people's experiences, needs and interests. A democratic, equal and inclusive society is built on collective reasoning and progress developed by taking a scientific approach (Gustavsson, 2013, pp. 37–40; Korsgaard, 2002, pp. 9–11; Manninen, 2017, pp. 325–326).

The practice of *folkbildning* functioned at the intersection of *pedagogik* and politics. With the establishment of *folk* high schools, workers' institutes and study associations, *folkbildning* was formalised as a form of civic education. The collective learning practices characteristic of these institutions promoted the establishment of a civil society characterised by networks of associations engaged in a multitude of social, cultural and political practices. *Folkbildning* strove to anchor the processes of human growth to the development of organic communities at the local level. Learning and growth was to be furthered in a collective manner through systematic interaction and dialogue between equals based on personal experiential knowledge (Korsgaard, 2000).

As substantiated within *folkbildning*, *bildning* builds on the potential and ability of humans to realise their potential in an orderly, social and sustainable manner. It expresses a confidence in, recognition of and reliance on humans and represents a source of educational hope and trust (Hardy et al., 2015). *Bildning* is understood as an open-ended educational ideal and a lifelong process of becoming more human. *Bildning* is grounded in the interplay between self-formation and the world, experiences and new knowledge (Gustavsson, 1996; Masschelein & Ricken, 2003, p. 140). *Bildning* and action research are characterised by *bothandness*; as a hermeneutic endeavour, *bildning* aims to bridge the known with the unknown, and it relates to *both* the process of becoming more human *and* the aims of autonomous and critical citizens capable of self-reflection and self-determination. The process of becoming and acting as a responsible and knowledgeable human being is related to the development of the capabilities and skills needed both at the workplace and during leisure time (Gustavsson, 1996). For Siljander (2007) *bildning* referred to

The historical development processes of both individuals and societies in which people systematically strive towards developing themselves and their socio-cultural environment into something 'more humane,' 'more enhanced' and 'more developed'. (p. 71)

Action research emanating from this conceptualisation of *bildning* stands for furthering democratic practices and nurturing social justice. It is sensitive to local agency and reflects a confidence in and recognition of humans. In our times, when confronting a multitude of challenges and threats, *bildning* represents a type of universal political ideal. It substantiates the responsibility and knowledgeability of humans willing to and capable of relating their behaviour and actions to the environment, the climate and the planet. *Bildning* stands for the willingness and capacity to take a stance and act with regard to the issues on the current political agenda. It relates to sustainability by emphasising ‘the arduous art of knowing together’ (Sörlin, 2019, p. 212).

For us, *pedagogik* stands for an institutionalised conception of *bildning* with a focus on the formal process of professionally bringing up children in schools and classrooms. It is based on education as a science and realised by autonomous and professional teachers. *Pedagogik* orientates teachers towards their relationship with students and a focus on the processes of teaching, studying and learning. It reaches beyond pedagogical practices in schools, as it aims to reach social goals and foster democratic citizens capable of furthering democracy. The aim of *bringing children up* to certain social and societal aims brings a moral dimension to the pedagogical relationship. This normative aspect assumes that teachers act with professional proficiency. It includes both the capability of relating to the institutionalised aims of education and to an awareness of acting according to certain moral principles and societal values. The normative dimension coincides with the descriptive dimension of *pedagogik*, focusing on the didactical dimensions of teachers acting professionally in relation to their students (Kansanen, 2003, p. 12).

From a professional–pedagogical point of view, teachers are assumed to be capable of bringing together descriptive and normative dimensions into a holistic conception of teaching. They are to act in accordance with professional and practical theories. Eilertsen and Jakhelln (2014) in Norway developed an interpretation of *pedagogik* that had originally been presented by the Norwegian researchers Lars Løvlie and Erling Lars Dale, called the *practical knowledge regime* (PKR). It represents a theory about and for practice, rather than a theory in practice. PKR aims to conceptualise and promote teachers’ autonomy and their ongoing development as vital aspects of their professional practice. The concept of *practical professional theory* within PKR refers to a process by which teachers’ professional knowledge is to be developed in and through practice. This process consists of substantiating teachers’ professional actions, their epistemic considerations and their everyday practical reasoning with ethical considerations. This is to be done via collaborative learning practices in dialogue with colleagues and researchers. In Eilertsen and Jakhelln’s (2014) interpretation, PKR defines a conceptualisation of *pedagogik* as a unified discipline with a solid theoretical foundation by representing

a shift from pedagogy, as a scientific, epistemic and fragmented endeavour, to practice and praxis as the point of departure for pedagogical and educational knowledge building. This also implied a shift from a definition of teachers

as obedient consumers of academically generated knowledge, to autonomous learning professionals integrating science-based results, experience-based knowledge and normative considerations into their everyday practice. (p. 27)

## Action Research for Being

In the following, we bring together our conceptualisation of educational action research as it has been developed and is being used in the context of the three Nordic countries in question. We relate to it as a tradition and practice with certain characteristics that appear when studied with reference to other traditions and practices – in our case, the Anglo-Saxon tradition, as described above. In the Nordic countries, educational action research has mainly been formed as an arena for democratic collaborative inquiry. It can be compared with various Anglo-Saxon variants, which appear to have been formed as interventionist practices, as methods to be used by teachers. As an interventionist practice, educational action research focuses on theory-for-practice and knowledge for professional action. As a practice for democratic collaborative inquiry, educational action research emphasises theory-in-practice and a collegial dialogue for understanding. Interpretation and meaning-making precedes purposeful action. With reference to *bildning* and how it was substantiated in *folkbildning*, we depict our conceptualisation as *action research for being*. In schools, action research for being embraces the constitutive relationship between the teacher and students and the capability of teachers to bring together the descriptive and normative dimensions of teaching.

In an attempt to conceptualise action research within critical educational science, Carr and Kemmis (1986, pp. 202–203) referred to technical action research as a practice that focuses on effectiveness and efficiency according to external criteria or aims to develop individuals' practical reasoning. We relate this form to *action research for doing*. It focuses on interventions, development and improvement with an emphasis on methodology and follows a stepwise cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. This dates to Lewin (1946, p. 38), who introduced action research as a means to achieve the rational social management of intergroup relations. As Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 165) maintained, the aim of improving a practice, practitioners' understanding of the practice and the situation in which it takes place coincides with the involvement of those responsible for the practice. Improvement assumes involvement, and vice versa. Edward-Groves and Rönnerman (2021, pp. 5–6) note that educational research for professional and school development has been characterised by an emergence of various 'new' forms of professional learning practices that focus on collegiality and collaboration. Still, we relate to communities of practice, professional learning communities, coaching conversations and inquiry learning as practices of action research for doing. These innovations are often introduced in a catchphrase and as a means for improving student outcomes. They seem to be 'masquerading as action research rather than substantively as action research' (Edward-Groves & Rönnerman, 2021, p. 6).

Action research for being relies on democratic forms and arenas for collaborative learning. *Bildning* as the basic orientation for it is comparable with Dewey's (1916) conceptualisation of education as a social process with a focus on human growth – not merely a preparation for life but being life itself. Action research for being builds on democratic working methods, bringing teachers, principals, students and researchers together as equals in reciprocal dialogues. Edward-Groves and Rönnerman (2021) derived 'action research from its historical principle of being a democratic way of working' (p. 35) and identified its seven cornerstones, namely contextuality, commitment, communication, collaboration, criticality, collegiality and community.

The early application of action research in working life in the 1960s, which influenced the development of educational action research in the Nordic context, relies on the involvement of and employers' participation in decision-making. Democratic dialogues, dialogue conferences (Gustavsen, 2006) and co-generative learning (Elden & Levin, 1991) echo both the principles and the practices of study circles and can be traced back to the ideals and forms of *folkbildning* in late 19th century. People strive to cope with societal and social transformation by coming together, sharing experiences and learning together, and this formed a learning platform for democracy, equality and social justice that was characteristic of the Nordic welfare state model, which, alongside *bildning*, seems to have attracted some renewed interest in our times.

Within education, we have in recent decades witnessed a plethora of global movements for collaborative working methods for teachers, professional learning and school development, albeit with an unambiguous focus on performance and learning outcomes (Vangrieken et al., 2015, p. 18). In our conceptualisation, and with reference to the study circle as an ideal form of collaborative practice, collaborative learning endeavours are contextualised by being reflected in democratic forms of social and societal life. Larsson (2001) identified seven aspects of democracy, namely equal participation, horizontal relations, recognition of diverse identities, knowledge that informs standpoints, deliberative communication and action, democratic decision-making and striving for action to form society, reflected in the ideal of the study circle. All of them reflect the bothandness of *bildning*, representing simultaneously means and ends.

In action research for being, as realised in the context of school development, professional dialogues become *both* an organic feature of everyday school life *and* an element of all the collaborative arenas in which school development is planned, organised and systematically reflected on in both the short- and long-term. Sustainable development lies in the formation of a local community of professional meaning-making and learning with a strong focus on site-based practices, experiences, challenges, resources and solutions. As the ideal of *bildning*, democratic professional dialogues, and the arenas formed to maintain them, are both means and ends for both self-fulfilment and development. They enable and enhance both human beings and the process of becoming professional. Still, to further development and sustainability, educational action research builds on an inquiry stance and a critical-reflective

approach. We conceptualise the recurrent stepwise process of reflection, planning, acting and observing alongside the use of various tools for documentation and reflection as a process rather than a product. Action research as an ongoing collaborative professional process challenges projectification and short-term and outcome-orientated interventions. Action research with a focus on processes relies on *bildning*; it enables educationalists *to be, to grow and to develop* while engaging themselves in ‘the arduous art of knowing together’ (Sörlin, 2019).

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