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What is This?
Developing social work practice through engaging practitioners in action research

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Abstract
This article describes a particular approach – a methodology – for examining the ways in which social workers conceptualize children and childhood and the significance of this for developing social work practice. The research described was carried out in Iceland working directly with Icelandic social work practitioners. The methodology adopted used an action research approach, in which young people, who had interacted with social services, were engaged as research consultants. The article evaluates such an approach, paying particular attention to the approach as a method of generating new knowledge, and its usefulness for the development of social work practice.

Keywords
action research, methodology, participatory research, practice research, young people

Introduction
Social work research has highlighted the importance of social workers’ attitudes towards childhood in influencing the development of their practice (Cloke and Davies, 1995; Collings and Davis, 2008; Mayall, 1994; Shemmings, 2000). But how can the views of young people be taken into account when developing social work practice? What preconceptions of young people do social workers bring to their work? How do these conceptualizations and views interact?

These three questions lie at the heart of this research. This article describes a particular approach – a methodology – which allowed the questions to be tackled through a unifying framework of action research. The underlying idea was to elicit the views of young people who had some inside experience of social work, and to

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present these views to practicing social workers, who were then asked to modify their practice.

The research examined the nature and significance of social work practitioners’ conceptualizations of childhood, with the purpose of developing more child-directed practice. The main focus of this article is the participatory research with the practitioners and how this was informed by young people as consultants to the research. Research relationships acknowledged both the capacity of practitioners to shape their professional intervention and the capacity of young people to influence research into services that affect their lives. The research was carried out in Iceland by the British author and the consultation with the young people was co-facilitated with an Icelandic researcher. An analysis of Icelandic social work practice and context is beyond the scope of this article, but can be found in a doctoral thesis (Fern, 2008). However, the potential difficulties for participatory research in this cross-cultural context are acknowledged, and the ways in which ideas and concepts held by the different parties in the research were examined and clarified, are illustrated.

In addition, the concept of child-directed practice developed through this research is not discussed in this article but has been explored in the doctoral thesis. Briefly, the concept of child-directed practice involves a shift in power relations towards greater equality between practitioners and children in how practice is conceptualized and carried out. The way that children are conceptualized by practitioners is seen as pivotal to the power relations that follow between practitioners and children. In particular, in child-directed practice, the child is viewed as working alongside the adults in a more equal position, assisting practitioners in the direction of practice, and drawing from their own experience (Fern, 2008).

Involving practitioners as participants in research

Ten social workers and two psychologists were involved throughout the research as participants, engaging with the researcher’s efforts to access their experience through interviews and workshops. Their talk and discussions with each other and the researcher about their practice with children generated the data for the research on their conceptualizations of childhood.

The criteria for inclusion were that participants were self-selecting practitioners with recent and significant experience of doing social work with children and families. This inclusive approach was taken in order to maximize the participation of practitioners willing to engage in action research (D’Cruz and Jones, 2004). It was consistent with participatory forms of action research that affirm the right and ability of people to contribute to knowledge that is about them. Initial access to practitioners was through managers; however, it soon became apparent that managers were controlling recruitment by asking teams to nominate representatives. Although assurances were given that the motivation behind this was to ensure that enough people took part, action was taken to widen inclusion through snowball techniques (Blaxter et al., 2001).
Two psychologists were included in the research because, as is commonplace in Iceland, they worked closely with social workers in the same teams, often undertaking work that was consistent in focus and method with social work practice. Participants were all white/Icelandic, aged from thirty to fifty-six, one was disabled. The majority (ten) were women reflecting the workforce gender balance. Considering the size of the group and that Iceland is a relatively homogenous society, the group provided a diverse and extensive range of experience in terms of location, roles, training and length of experience.

The aim was to recruit enough people to retain at least twelve participants, allowing for some attrition. Whilst twelve is a relatively small number of participants, it was considered a sufficient and manageable number given the design of the study, which included 27 individual interviews and three workshops with participants. Fifteen participants were recruited to be involved in the interviews before the action intervention and twelve of these remained involved throughout.

Involving young people as consultants to the research
To ensure coherence between the subject matter of the research, exploring the ways in which social workers conceptualize childhood, the significance of this for developing child-directed practice, and the research methodology, young people were involved in the research process as expert consultants. Ten young people, aged between thirteen and seventeen, with experience of contact with social workers, agreed to take part. Consultation meetings were scheduled so that the young people could inform key phases of the research from developing the research questions, contributing to the framework for data analysis, through to the evaluation. The recruitment of young people and how they worked together with the researchers to influence the research is discussed in another paper (Fern and Kristinsdóttir, forthcoming).

Action research
Action research focuses on solving problems that are relevant to particular situations and involves intervention in a social situation in order to bring about an improvement for those most affected by the research issues (Alston and Bowles, 1998.) However, action research covers a variety of research models which come from its history in various fields. Hart and Bond (1995) constructed a typology of four action research types along a continuum of research traditions from experimental to social constructionist. The distinction between the types turns on key differences in the ways in which the ‘problem’ to be solved is defined, the nature of the desired change, the method for bringing this about, and the relationship between researcher and researched. The three research types at the experimental end of the continuum, experimental, organizational and to some extent professionalizing, have been criticized for directing change from a top-down position, reinforcing managerial control and failing to include those affected by the research
(Hart and Bond, 1995; Oliver, 1992). On the other hand, in this research study, the production of knowledge and the action intervention were informed by the principles of reflexive practice (Fook, 2002b) and influenced by the critical perspectives of those with experiential knowledge of the problem, namely, the young service users as consultants. This marks a shift away from the traditional hierarchical relations of professional practice and research and thus situates the action research in the social constructionist research tradition and exemplifies a more participatory and empowering approach.

Action research is attractive to social care practitioners when it recognizes the issues they are dealing with and attractive to young people when it focuses on bringing about change in matters that concern them (Fleming, 2002; Stafford et al., 2003). Different types of action research also vary according to the degree of control exerted by the researcher over outcomes and definitions of improvement (Corbett et al., 2007; Löfman et al., 2004; Oliver, 1992). As already stated, an aim of the study was to improve professional practice for the benefit of children using social work services. However, it was acknowledged that there may be competing definitions of improvement, so the design created opportunities for dialogue and negotiation around different definitions. The study began with a focus on adult perceptions of childhood and the influence of these on the meaning and practice of children’s participation; this focus emerged from the researcher’s own experience and interests and a review of the relevant academic literature (James and Prout, 1997; Mayall, 1994; Shemmings, 2000). As the young people were engaged in the consultation process the research questions and the change intervention became more meaningful and relevant to their own concerns and context. Furthermore, their critical perspectives were integrated into the reflective workshops and informed the change intervention undertaken by the practitioners participating in the research.

A number of authors have argued the case for generating theory close to the context of social work practice in order to access ‘knowledge that is implicit in action’. This assists in developing knowledge that is connected to the problems of social work practice (Fook, 2002a: 93; Shaw and Ruckdeschel, 2002). As demonstrated in more detail below, the interviews with practitioners focused on their everyday experiences of work with children and the action was grounded by context and their interpretation. Holstein and Gubrium (2004: 144) argue that researchers always have a ‘model of the research subject behind persons placed in interview roles’ in their minds. In conventional approaches interviewees are seen as passive subjects who can be managed in order to produce accurate information. In contrast, it was more consistent with the participatory approach in this research to view interviewees as active participants who drew upon their substantial experience and insight to produce relevant accounts of their practice. Thus, the interviews with practitioners took the form of guided, intensive conversations (Charmaz, 2006).

Social workers and psychologists are not powerless groups; indeed they have considerable power over children and service users generally. However, in their
practice they do not always feel empowered to develop and change, especially in the context of increased managerialism, so it was considered to be important that the research treated them with respect for their skill and knowledge and also sought to foster their confidence in developing their practice in children’s interests (Fook, 2002a). The change intervention was undertaken collaboratively with the practitioners to improve their practices and their understanding of those practices. Through their action plans, practitioners were trying out new ways of working and developing their practice. In this sense the research was both professionally led and empowering in that practitioners were supported in acting on their own behalf as active participants in making changes (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000; Löfman et al., 2004). This process is elaborated and exemplified further in the sections below.

**Constructionist grounded theory: Data analysis**

A constructionist grounded theory approach was taken in the data gathering and data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The assumptions of this approach are consistent with the theoretical and methodological stance taken: that many different views of reality exist; that the researcher, in attempting to explore understandings from the ‘inside’, becomes part of, and is affected by, the participants’ world; and that the data and analysis is rooted in these shared experiences and relationships (Charmaz, 2001). The use of the word participant indicates their contribution to the research with data and analysis seen as produced through active participation.

QSR NVivo7, a computer software system designed for the analysis of qualitative data (Seale, 2000), was used to manage and code the data from the interviews and workshops with practitioners. During the action research process, initial grounded theory coding of the data was performed to define and describe what seemed most significant so that it could be discussed with both consultants and participants in order to inform the subsequent stages of the research (Charmaz, 2006).

**Cycles of action research**

An outline of the action research phases, with time running from top to bottom, is provided in Figure 1 below. The research cycles took place over a period of fifteen months.

As shown in the Figure, the phases of involvement with practitioners as participants and young people as consultants ran alongside each other in parallel. As service users the young people contributed their knowledge to inform and shape each phase of the research; however, they were not directly involved in generating data or in the action intervention. The work with the young people as consultants and the involvement of practitioners as participants were linked throughout by feedback from the researcher. In particular, the newsletter from consultants to the practitioners, sent prior to the reflective workshops, was a crucial link in
informing the action intervention. The other newsletters to practitioners and consultants, sent between phases as indicated in Figure 1, kept both groups informed and involved. Furthermore, one of the practitioners participating in the research attended for part of the evaluation meeting with the consultants in order to explain how she had developed her practice through her participation in the research.

At the heart of the research process with practitioners was a change intervention phase when practitioners worked on their individual action plans. Before and after this phase were two sets of semi-structured interviews with the practitioners which generated the richest source of data. The first set of interviews focused on practitioners’ accounts of their practice before the change intervention and the second set of interviews generated data on what they said had happened in their action.

**Ethical issues involving practitioners**

Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Icelandic Data Protection Authority and the research was consistent with the law and guidance for ethical practice of research in Iceland (Icelandic Data Protection Agency, 2008). Ethical approval for the study was also obtained from the School of Health and Social Studies at the University of Warwick, UK.

A research agreement for participants provided full information on the research aims and process, data access and storage, privacy and confidentiality, and publication intentions. Particular attention was paid to three issues: the use of English in the research, confidentiality in a small society, and the potential risks and benefits of participating in action research.

The research agreement was produced in English only and explained that all the fieldwork with participants would be conducted in English. Icelanders have a high level of verbal fluency in English and professionals have to engage with the international literature written in English and the Scandinavian languages in order to draw upon a sufficiently wide body of knowledge. Nevertheless, the potential difficulties for participatory research in this cross-cultural context are acknowledged. However, the asymmetries in the linguistic and socio-cultural resources of the researcher and participants were viewed as resources through which ideas and concepts held by both parties could be examined and clarified (Silverman, 2000). This is discussed in the sections on data generation below.

All the interviews and group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed; the recordings and transcriptions were stored electronically. This was explained to participants in the research agreement, but consent was verbally renewed for each individual recording. Confidentiality for research participants and for any service users discussed required special attention because Icelandic society is small and relationships are close. The usual precautions were taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved and the service users referred to during data generation, including use of pseudonyms in dissemination and security measures in storage of data. In addition, research participants were given the opportunity to check documentation and suggest further changes if they thought it was identifiable
(Blaxter et al., 2001). Interestingly, this resulted in the removal of pseudonyms from some documentation because on one occasion I had inadvertently selected a correct first name as a pseudonym. This was more likely to happen in a small society in which children’s names must be chosen from a relatively small list of prescribed Icelandic names.

The literature on action research has highlighted both benefits and risks for participants (Boser, 2006; Lofman et al., 2004). When participants become closely involved in research, they may benefit from a sense of empowerment and ‘diffusion’ of learning (Humphreys and Metcalfe, 2002: 5). Furthermore, in this research, practitioners commented during the evaluation on the additional benefits of working together as a group and learning more about one another’s experience and practice. On the other hand, participation in change may mean that the research is more intrusive and makes greater demands emotionally and practically (Boser, 2006; Lofman, et al., 2004;). Indeed, practitioners commented during the evaluation that it was frustrating when they felt they had too little time to devote to the development of their practice within the research. To maximize benefits and minimize risks, efforts were made to ensure that the research was relevant and practical in the context of participants’ working lives. This is explained in the section below on the reflective workshops and action planning, which provides examples of how practitioners’ plans for developing their practice were stimulated by the consultants’ questions but also grounded in practitioners’ own experiences and current practice concerns. Furthermore, research relationships were reciprocal; participants were engaged in generating and discussing the data, which provided opportunities for reflection and learning. Newsletters provided summaries of their contributions and informal communication via email and telephone stimulated dialogue and provided continuity, information and support.

**Data generation: Interviews before the action intervention**

As already indicated, the interviews with practitioners were semi-structured qualitative interviews in which practitioners were viewed as active participants, drawing on their experience to contribute to the research enquiry. Their responses within the interviews – their willingness to reflect on their practice and engage in extended discussions – indicated that they too viewed their role as active and engaged in the beginning of a process.

A distinctive aspect of the interviews was the way in which the consultants’ questions and perspectives influenced the interview discussions. To show how the consultants’ views and the practitioners’ conceptualizations of children and childhood interacted, the discussion below focuses on selected examples of the questions and issues posed by the consultants and how these worked out when explored with practitioners.

For example, in formulating their questions, the consultants drew on experiences of discussing their worries about their relationships at school, and finding that these worries had been reinterpreted by adults, with themselves defined as
having a problem and being sent to see someone else to be helped. In their view, this made it difficult to feel they had any control over what happened and led to considerable resentment about the way in which their situation had been defined. Accordingly, they suggested that practitioners could work on:

- Keeping an open mind and getting a fuller picture before deciding what was best to do... and not forcing children to see people if they don’t want to, even if they think it will help.

The interviews with practitioners focused initially on specific examples of their work with children, starting from the first point of referral to the social work agency; this worked well in drawing out the significance of the child’s own voice in how their situation was defined. When this was explored in the interviews a contrast emerged between conceptualizations of children as problems and children seen as active in defining their own problems. For example, in some accounts the professional process of making sense of referrals and framing the intervention seemed to construct the child as the problem:

- Stefán: He was getting into fights and conflicts with other children in school. He was in conflict with teachers. All the descriptions were that he was not functioning socially...

- Hanna: The referral said the boy was a problem in school. He was rude to teachers, so they asked parents’ permission to take a drug test...

In contrast, other accounts, sometimes from the same practitioner, indicated that the practitioner had heard the child’s voice at an early stage in defining the problem. In these accounts the practitioners were more likely to treat the child as an active agent and listen to the child’s ideas for solutions to the problems.

- Stefán: There was bullying... the child says that the teachers were bullying him. He was approached by teachers in a negative way and he was upset because of how people were behaving towards him.

- Magnús: [He] wanted to talk to someone who was not involved in his life in other ways and get some advice, like seeing a doctor. When they come to you in that way, they have a problem for you...

Some of the issues raised by consultants echoed findings from previous research with young people, including the importance of personal qualities of empathy and ability to form relationships, together with professional qualities linked to their education and experience (Bell, 2002; Munro, 2001; Sandbæk, 1999). A distinctive aspect of their perspectives, however, was their emphasis on practitioners’ feelings about children and their records of solving problems and achieving positive results:
How do you feel about kids, e.g. autistic ones and the like, also kids with ordinary problems?

Do you ignore them, or do you listen to them and take an interest in solving their problems?

Have you had positive results in your experience?

These questions were followed through in the interviews by asking practitioners to comment on their own effectiveness and to compare this with what the child might say about it, identifying possible areas of agreement and divergence. Most practitioners found this very difficult, partly because they had not asked for the children’s views and partly because they were unused to the idea that children could evaluate their intervention:

Hanna: Oh – I don’t know, I am not sure if they see it the same way.

Anna: God, um I... what would they say? This is very tricky – you are asking me to tell you how they value me?

Analysis of these responses, along with other data generated, suggested views of young people as being incompetent in influencing and evaluating practice interventions. This contrasted with young people’s own views of themselves as active and contributing to what might help improve their own and their family situation, and was an important focus of discussion in the reflective workshops.

Similarly, understandings of abstract concepts, such as child-centred practice, were examined and clarified as shown in the following extracts from two different interviews when practitioners were asked to say how they understood the concept of child-centred practice:

Anna: I am not sure – my work gives me the chance to decide what is in the child’s best interests. If you want me to talk in general ... I think we are too concerned with helping the parents and the environment and fixing ... Of course the best thing for kids is to stay in their environment but we can have the agenda that we are so busy helping the parents that we forget the small individual in there that should be our focus.

Stefán: Child’s interests? I think adults and professionals with children are defining when we allow them to come to the table to address us. I think we do that too much and even though we say other things, even though we have legislation that says otherwise we are not doing it. That is something, I am pretty sure I could have done things otherwise than I have myself in the past. But in the last few years I think I have been pretty aware of the different perspectives and the importance of hearing or presenting the child.
This process encouraged deeper reflection on practice and included observations that a focus on the child’s ‘best interests’ does not necessarily advance children’s influence or welfare. For example, Anna discussed her work with two young people aged ten and twelve years who had been living for several years with a mentally ill father who was violent towards their mother. In the context of previous research, her account could be seen as illustrating the tension in practice between adult responsibility to act in the best interests of the child and the child’s wishes (Eekelaar, 1994; Thomas and O’Kane, 1998). Her account indicated that at first, her judgement was to act immediately in their best interests and remove them from the home. Through further direct work, including the young people as active contributors to defining their situation and deciding what would help; she recognized their resilience in handling the situation and accepted their view that previous social work involvement, including periods in care, had not achieved a long term satisfactory outcome. This led to an alternative plan that both safeguarded their welfare and took account of their knowledge about their experiences.

**Reflective workshops and action planning**

The purpose of the reflective workshops was to provide opportunities for practitioners to discuss the findings from the first set of interviews and to collaborate in formulating their plans for developing their practice. Two examples of discussions in these workshops illustrate how practitioners’ different experiences and perspectives stimulated ideas for developing practice that could then be formulated into specific plans for action.

An important theme in the consultants’ newsletter was trust and confidentiality. In the first consultation meeting they said they would ask practitioners:

How can I be sure that you won’t tell anybody else?

In the second consultation meeting, when we discussed the findings from the first interviews with practitioners, the consultants emphasized that good social workers:

Talk with you as well as about you.

Discuss with you what they are saying about you to others. And tell you about meetings and ask you if you want to be there.

In one practitioner workshop these views stimulated a discussion around practitioners’ experiences of considering their practice from young people’s perspectives, which led to an action plan for developing practice in preparing young people for participation in meetings. To assist with interpreting the discussion, it is important to note that systematic participation of children
and young people in decision-making forums was not supported by any regulatory framework or practice guidance in Iceland, thus the practitioners were developing their practice in a relatively unsupportive environment.

Björk: There was a meeting at school where we were going to be talking about [the young person]. His mentor was there and the teachers and his mum. We were all sat there and then the boy (I didn’t tell him that we were going to meet) just popped in and said, ‘Are you talking about me?’ I learnt a lot there and afterwards I talked to him. But he was suspicious, of course. He wanted to know what we were saying . . .

Sylvia: In my mind it is also the role of the parent to tell what is going on, but they might not do that.

Björk: No.

Benedikt: We have referral meetings with the family and school and seldom ask the child whether he or she wants to be involved. Mostly we write to the parents and ask them to bring the child but there is no discussion about what is going to happen – no preparation to help them work out what to say or what is going to be discussed.

Björk: They could be saying – you are misbehaving so much and that’s why we are having this meeting.

Anna: Sometimes parents don’t even bring the child along, perhaps because the child does not want to go.

Sylvia: But perhaps we do not know it is the child not wanting to come – perhaps the parents don’t want the child to be there?

Benedikt: I will be informing the child about the meeting and talking about how they want to have their say or how their views can be taken into account.

In another practitioner workshop, participants’ context and experiences led in a different direction. Margrét, who ran a community group work project, described her practice of completing records with young people, which led to a discussion of the difference in respect afforded to children’s and adults’ rights to be involved and kept informed:

Margrét: I sit at the computer and write and read aloud what I am putting and ask the young person is that ok? The plan or what we have talked about. So we can look back at it. It is important that they are part of the process and accepting or declining what is written down. And they write their name under and I print it out.
Kristín: If you are making goals – you of course do it with the person you are making the goals with. And I was thinking about letters we send about children – they should see them.

Íris: We do it with adults.

Kristín: This is saying something about children that we don’t do it with them.

Following on from this discussion another participant, Hanna, recorded in her written action plan that she:

…would like to focus on how to involve children more in my practice by reading my journals [running records] to them and asking them if they agree. I will explain about the research and ask them to give me feedback at the end of this.

The practitioners attending the workshops found the experience of discussing the data and hearing the consultants’ views very motivating. The discussions gave another perspective on the data, one that was influenced by the consultants’ views, as evidenced in practitioners’ reflections. Finally, the action interventions emanated from the practitioners’ own contexts and were sensitive to the micro-processes of practice (Shaw and Ruckdeschel, 2002).

Supporting the action intervention

A semi-structured action research diary incorporating an action plan record was supplied to practitioners to use during the action phase. Twelve practitioners responded by working on a written action plan identifying how they planned to develop more child-directed practice, what support they needed and how they were going to evaluate what they were doing. The diary was provided to encourage participants to reflect and record what had happened as they worked at developing their practice and as an aid to memory during the second interview. It was, therefore, for participants’ own personal use rather than a data generation tool. The plans produced were all consistent with the framework of expectations set out by the consultants. As already indicated in the discussion above, the plans focused on taking young people’s views on their situation and on practitioner intervention seriously, including asking directly for feedback on the impact of new practice initiatives. All the plans provided additional opportunities for young people to express their views and be involved in decision-making, through new practice initiatives in meetings or through direct work with children and young people.

Support was provided throughout the action intervention phase through: email and telephone contact; a newsletter; and small group meetings. It was important to maintain combined roles of supporter, facilitator and critical commentator throughout this phase. Relevant research papers and internet resource links were
provided to encourage reflection and critical thinking. Feedback on action plans and discussion about what was happening encouraged participants to persevere or review and change their plans when they got stuck. In return the practitioners remained committed to the research, both to assist the research and to develop their practice for the benefit of children.

Towards the end of the action intervention phase, four participants were worried because they had not done what they had hoped in their action plans and expressed doubts about remaining involved in the research. They were encouraged to remain involved in the research on the basis that their experience was equally important data in relation to the research questions and all four agreed to be interviewed again. This sense that all parties are gaining from the process, combined with negotiating the ‘research bargain’ at key points, is an essential part of participatory action research (Hart and Bond, 1995).

Data gathering: Interviews after the action intervention

The second set of interviews followed the action intervention phase and focused on practitioners’ accounts of what had happened in their individual action plans and the impact of the study on their practice. I acknowledge that the research findings relied upon practitioners’ own accounts and that these may have been influenced by other factors, for example, by practitioners saying what they thought I wanted to hear, or by a wish to defend themselves against an unfavourable evaluation of their practice. The chances of this happening were minimized by my approach from an insider perspective, as a social worker with considerable experience and with a sympathetic understanding of their practice context (Fook, 2002a). Confidence in the authenticity of the data was increased through the care taken in the interviews to elicit descriptions that were as concrete as possible and rich in detail about practitioners’ thoughts and actions (Fook, 2002a; Gilgun and Abrams, 2002).

Conclusion: Evaluating the approach

The involvement of young people as consultants to the study was crucial to the credibility of the research; it demonstrated a commitment to the action research principles of involving those most affected with the aim of achieving social change in the interests of social justice. Their questions and views communicated through the newsletter to practitioners and reflected upon in the workshops, had a powerful impact on the discussions and informed practitioners’ plans for developing more child-directed practice. This particular group of young people did not wish to extend their involvement further, feeling that they had fulfilled their original commitment and were moving on in their lives. However, in the third consultation meeting when we evaluated the action research they recommended that involvement in similar action research approaches should be the basis of future involvement with other groups.
In the evaluation workshops with practitioners we discussed the significance of the young people’s views both for their practice and their experience of participating in the research. In the following extract the group are responding to Jónas’s description of asking the groups of young people using his service for their feedback on the service:

Magnús: It is very important to have feedback from young people so we know in which direction to go.

Tómas: I think what Jónas said was interesting about the response ... When you tell them that this is a part of a research project they become more interested. They become more motivated and also ... you can talk about things that are personal but you do it in a different framework.

Margrét: Yes, you are not saying tell me about you – not directly.

Tómas: You are [not] talking about your problems and difficulties ... but ... giving advice to other people.

Jónas: You ... go inside yourself to get your experience to share it with others so that they can also learn from it.

This demonstrates that practitioners acknowledged the value of young people’s experiences and views in directing their practice intervention and contributing to the research. The mirroring of research and practice with corresponding positive changes in the direction of child-directed practice are an important contribution to knowledge concerning the development of social work practice.

Hart and Bond (1995: 121) assert that ‘attention to process helps generate participation and to create the conditions for change’. Informal and formal methods were employed to maximize participation and create challenging but supportive conditions for the practitioners’ interventions aiming at more child-directed practice. In the evaluation workshop with practitioners, I asked for feedback on whether participants felt supported and challenged or coerced. I received the following feedback in response:

Tómas: I think you have been giving out a lot of information and getting in contact and I have had this feeling that we need to be pushed a lot – that is just how things are. It is hard for me to see how you could have done it differently. If you had been more passive, probably nothing would have happened.

Björk: If you had been more aggressive we would have run away.

Jónas: You are a patient person.
Benedikt: I think it made a lot of difference that you made a personal contact to each of us – had a good chat and that was very helpful.

The workshops were an important means of offering participants alternative ways of viewing their practice without imposing the researcher’s views. At times, participants looked to the researcher for direction in deciding how to develop their practice and, of course, ideas emerging from the work with consultants and from the data analysis were suggested. However, care was also taken not to impose these, but to provide opportunities for practitioners to work in small groups and, without the researcher present, discuss ideas that were grounded in their own context, useful and actionable (Bradbury and Reason, 2003). By these means, the power and influence of the researcher was reduced and a more cooperative enquiry was encouraged. Furthermore, feedback during evaluation indicated that the change in practice had gone beyond just one individual and had been incorporated into the team approach:

Benedikt: I think I have made a lot of difference in what we are doing ... we have agreed in the team to change our way of doing things.

The small number of practitioners participating could be criticized. However, the size of the group was ideal for maintaining the length and depth of their engagement. This involvement produced rich data, leading to a nuanced picture of practitioners’ understandings of children and childhood. During the action intervention phase, practitioners engaged in a reflexive research process to develop and evaluate new practice initiatives. Young people’s active input as consultants was engaged to ensure that the action intervention was informed by their knowledge and directed by their interests. This approach is consistent with the aim of fostering more egalitarian power relations in practice and research with children and young people.

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