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Action Learning in Tripartite Teacher-Student Partnership:
Dialog Seminar, a Tool for Integration of Research and Development in Teacher Education

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Abstract

Student teachers, school based teachers and university based teachers represent the three fundamental parts of teacher education. This project builds on an action research project aiming to understand the relationship between the university and university schools, and the focus lies in the tripartite collaboration between student teachers, school based teachers and university based teachers regarding the supervision of students' bachelor theses. This qualitative study was carried out by collecting empirical material from seven dialog seminars, constituting one of several dialog based action research methods in which students, university and school based teachers are participating. The aim is to ascertain how the knowledge of action learning is expressed and understood between the participants in dialog seminars, and how the dialog seminar can function as a collaborative forum.

Keywords: *Teacher Education, Action Learning, Research and Development, Partnership, Dialog Seminar*

Introduction

Research and development (R&D) based teacher education has been regarded as a key factor for the successful improvement of education in several studies (Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Educa-

tion, 2012). The Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions (UHR) points out that student teachers' research also should be included as a natural part of R&D with regard to teacher education (The Norwegian Association of Higher Education institutions, 2011). The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) finds that this principle of R&D is understood and put into practice in different ways, and argue that a broader understanding of the principle might give a more solid foundation for developing teacher education, where also development work and tacit knowledge is included and equal in this principle (Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, 2012).

Another interest field for improvement of teacher education points to collaborative practices (Adler, Seok-Woo, & Heckscher, 2008; Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000; Puchner &Taylor, 2006). In this field of collaboration for improvement, the foci for sharing and developing knowledge in smaller units have a large impact in the field and include networking (Hakkarainen, Palonen, Paavola, & Lehtinen, 2004) and partnership (Abbott, Tapia, & Greenwood, 1999; Andreassen, 2014 a and b; Cornelissen et al., 2014; Edwards, 2005; Smith, 2007; Zeichner, 2006; Woods, 2014).

Research on networking and partnership is often concentrated on the collaboration between university based teachers and school based teachers for the purpose of strengthening the professional learning of pre-service teachers (Allen, Howells, & Radford, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2006) or between school leaders and the university (Hakkarainen et al., 2004). Others have focused on collaboration where the student teacher is involved in a partnership with teacher educators (Smith & Sela, 2005). To a lesser extent research has also focused on the tripartite partnership of student teacher, university based teacher and school based teacher in research partnership (Andreassen, 2014 a and b; Mtika, Robson, & Fitzpatric, 2014).

Action research is often pointed out as a good strategy for collaborative partnership (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Postholm & Moen, 2011; Smith & Sela, 2005; Tiller, 2007; Ulvik, 2014).The German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) is generally recognized as the person who first used the term 'action research':

> The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice (Lewin, 1946, reproduced in Lewin, 1948, p. 202-203).

His approach involves a spiral of steps in an ongoing process "each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact finding about the result of the action" (ibid). The practice can be illustrated as in McNiff & Whitehead's (2006, p. 9) shown in model 1:
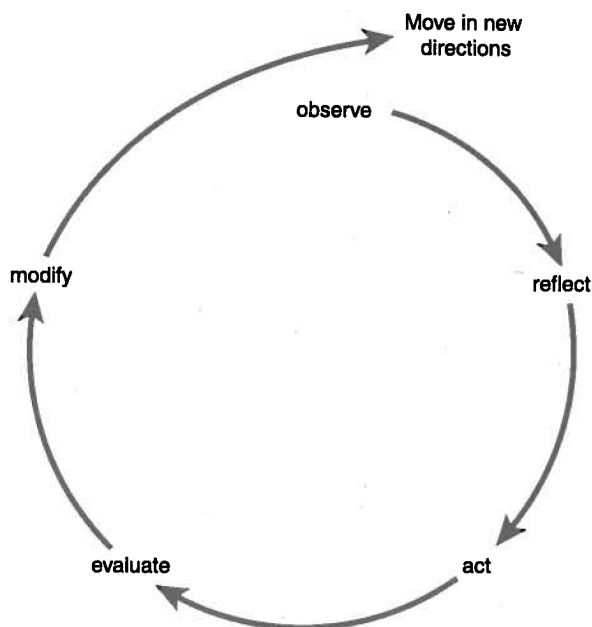
Model 1. An action-reflection cycle (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006).

In an action enquiry you observe something of concern, try a different way of acting, reflect on your process and evaluate, and then modify and try out new directions. This process is often referred to as an action-reflection cycle (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p. 9).

Context

In the fall of 2010 a pilot for a new teacher education program was started at a university in Norway. The programs were changed from a 4-year bachelor degree program for students becoming teachers in grades 1-10, to 5-year master degree programs for students becoming teachers in grades 1-7 and in grades 5-10 in primary and secondary schools. The new programs were developed for several reasons: The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, NOKUT, had completed a thorough evaluation of existing teacher education programs in Norway and reached the conclu-

sion that they did not make the connection between theory and practice well enough. Research clearly described a pattern where the teacher education programs in Norway struggled to combine the theoretical and practical aspects of the education (Ministry of Education & Research, 2009; Nordenbo, 2008; Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, 2006). R&D was, as earlier mentioned, regarded as a solution for strengthening teacher education in Norway (Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, 2012).

For the teacher education pilot, NOKUT's advice was sought, and R&D is pointed out as an important feature in increasing the length of the education from four to five years (Pilot in the North, 2008). In June 2014, a permanent decision from the Ministry of Education and Research stated that from 2017 all teacher education in Norway would be changed to 5-year master's programs (Ministry of Education and Research, 2014). Therefore, this study, based on experiences from the pilot, will have research interest in terms of organization, knowledge, and experience from an existing teacher education program.

Action learning with regard to student teachers' bachelor projects

In this five year pilot program, student teachers will be introduced to research and be familiar with the term *teachers as researchers* by participating in projects that involve close connection with schools in increasing the duration of training and with the procedural steps (UIT – The Arctic University of Norway, Bachelor-pamphlet, 2012). Smaller research projects are being performed in the first and second year of the five year program, but the first larger research project is for the student teachers' bachelor project. As part of these projects student teachers are required to use *action learning,* which is a variety of action research (Tiller, 2006), as their approach for collecting data for their theses.

Action learning can be defined as a continuing learning and reflection process supported by colleagues with the aim of addressing a mutual challenge between the participants (Tiller, 2006, p. 52). According to Tiller (2006), when utilizing action learning in teacher education student teachers are the practitioners, and school based teachers and university based teachers are the researchers, and the aim for the student teachers and school based teachers is to reflect on the process and for the school based teachers

to be able to open up to improve own practice (Postholm & Moen, 2011; Tiller, 2006).

A clear differentiation from action research is that in action learning there is no demand for scientific publication, but it still needs the application of scientific procedures for accomplishment (Andreassen, 2014a). Action learning can be defined as teachers' knowledge of the profession; what they know, should do, and what they know works in practice, often with a scientific foundation, which moves beyond personal experiences and tacit knowledge (Andreassen, 2014b; Plauborg, Andresen, & Bayer, 2007). Action learning with regard to the bachelor projects builds on the idea of a process of systematically trying out new ideas and new knowledge in partnership with experienced school based and university based teachers. The idea behind this is that as student teachers work with their theses and collect empirical material and write, they will integrate theory and practice in a more effective way than had been done in education before (UIT- The Arctic University of Norway, Bachelor-pamphlet, 2014).

University Schools

For the bachelor projects to be accomplished, the collaboration between the university and schools has to be effective. In many ways the process depends on practitioners, which in this case means the supervisors both at university and in schools. For the school based teachers the collaboration is realized in a project called *University Schools*. In the beginning of the project there were six schools in the local community, which, based on different criteria set by the university, received status and commitment as university schools (Pilot in the North, 2008). In the long run the intention of the project is to incorporate several other schools, and also find ways to benefit schools which have not yet received the status (Pilot in the North, 2008). However, focus on R&D and long experience with student teachers in their practice terms are criteria that influence schools receiving the status. Schools also have to be open for research projects led by the university. And perhaps most importantly, schools have to support the student teachers' bachelor and master projects in collaboration with the university (Pilot in the North, 2008).

The benefit to university schools is that through close cooperation with the university they might have an opportunity to strengthen their collective professional competence since a part of the commitment is that school based teachers who are supervising the student teachers must have

extended vocational training (Pilot in the North, 2008). Danielsen's (2014) research shows that several of the principals in the university schools thought that school development and strengthening their teachers' competence as professionals is the most important motive for obtaining the status (Danielsen, 2014). The intention is also that leadership will develop through the principals participating in networking forums where the purpose is to produce a common mutual procedural plan among university schools for supervising student teachers (Pilot in the North, 2008).

Dialog Seminars

In organizing the bachelor projects it is desirable to create meeting points where all involved parties can join in. This was done in the pilot project by something that has been locally developed and named *dialog seminars* (Jakhelln & Rørnes, 2014; Rørnes, 2013). Dialog seminars have a close connection with dialog conferences and World Café (Thunberg, 2011) which are dialog based action research methods (Leirvik, 2005). These methods are developed from social-constructivist ideas where 'truth' is constructed through analysis of the participants' experiences and their shared reality (Leirvik, 2005). The participants are regarded as those with knowledge and the researchers to be the facilitators. Power issues are taught and solved through dialog and differential group sessions: "The dialogue is a process of exchange: ideas and arguments move to and from between participants" (Leirvik, 2005, p. 10). Dialog conferences and dialog seminars are based on dialog between different parts in a unit about how to solve a task, a challenge, or a problem; how a process is going to be handled and prioritized. The method takes into account the view that no one has *the* correct answer, and in a dialog process the problem is mapped and solved at the same time (Leirvik, 2005, p. 10). The dialog seminar held with regard to the bachelor process in the examined teacher education had, with small variations, the following clockwise structure as shown in model 2:

In the first part of the seminar the student teachers, school based teachers and university based teachers are together on the campus. This is where and when the topic is set and often the first part of the dialog seminar has the structure of a lecture (section 1 in the model). At the end of the session, tasks are given out and groups are formed by the organizers (section 2 in the model). It is important that the groups have an appropriate number of members for the task and the timeslot that is given. In the groups each member participates by writing down questions or points of view as notes
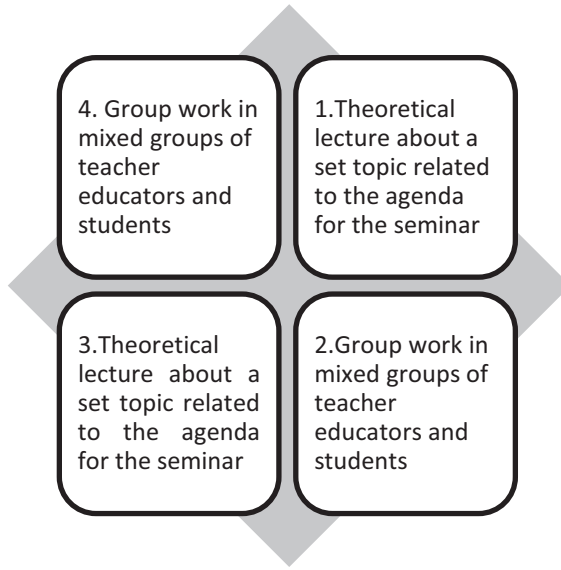
Model 2. Dialog seminar.

related to the task. The notes are pulled out one by one and explained first by the person who wrote the note and then thoroughly discussed. When the discussion naturally fades out the next person's note is pulled out.

After a set time, and often after a longer break, the groups meet up and a new session with the organizers of the dialog seminar is held. Different role playing scenarios in school about how to find a topic for an action learning project are held in this session, or this session might also been held as a lecture (section 3 in the model). Then a new topic for the group session is given out and often the same group constellations meet for a new session on the task that was given as the first part of the seminar, but if the task demands it, new groups are formed (section 4 in the model).

For the student teachers' bachelor projects, three dialog seminars are arranged. The first is arranged just before the student teachers' first practical placement period. The intention for this seminar is for the student teachers, university based teachers and school based teachers to be familiar with the concept of action learning. The second dialog seminar is held just before the second practical placement period when the student teachers put their project plan into action. The intention of the seminar is to secure the process, and also to strengthen the partnership between the university and schools. The third seminar is held after the student teachers hand in their bachelor theses. This seminar has the structure of an academic

conference where the student teachers have made academic posters of their project. Each project is presented and this seminar is open for everyone to join.

The framework for this project

For the theoretical framework of this research, symbolic-constructivism, or more specifically, symbolic-interactionism (SI), one of the most utilized methods in sociology, has been used (Ytterhus, 2001). SI is rooted in pragmatism, more specifically in the tradition of John Dewey and Herbert Mead. SI is a theoretical perspective for analyzing society, with the aim for a researcher being to understand processes more then to predict an outcome. SI, as many other theoretical approaches, has many branches, and for this project Herbert Blumer's (1969) definition of SI is used to clarify analysis of the data. Blumer (1969) argues that individuals have a common set of symbols and understanding (Blumer, 1969, p. 159). Individuals are viewed as active constructors of their own lives: "[they] interpret, evaluate, define, and map out their own actions, rather than act as passive beings who are impinged upon by outside forces" (Giddens, 1979, p. 50). SI also stresses the processes by which the individual makes decisions and forms own opinions (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). Against this backdrop, we pursue the following research question:

> How do student teachers, university based teachers, and school based teachers negotiate understanding about action learning in dialog seminars, and how does a tripartite collaboration develop in dialog seminars?

Methodology

This study is mainly based on data collected in seven dialog seminars, with a time span of two years (2012-2014) with two different groups of bachelor students. Participating in the seminars was a requirement for completion of the student teachers' bachelor degree, and the school based teachers were invited to the seminars.

The topics for the seminars in the first year (2012/2013) were: *Action Research and Action Learning, Schools as Learning Networks, The Professional Teacher* and *Bachelor Students' Presentation Day.* In year two (2013/2014), small adjustments were made and the seminars were reduced to three

seminars with the topics: *Action Learning, Bachelor Thesis* and *Bachelor Students' Presentation Day.* Each seminar had a time span from 4-6 hours. Each group session was set to last approximately ninety minutes. In the dialog seminars the researcher used a voice recorder and transcribed the recording in full length in the original language. Document analysis was also carried out with regard to the pilot's background and intention.

The researcher's role

In the groups, the role of the researcher was foregrounded, who was concurrently a university based teacher representing the pedagogy teachers. This involved supervising student teachers with regard to the bachelor projects. At the beginning of the group sessions the research project was presented, and also the purpose of participating in the group explained. Having the double role as researcher and university based teacher was important for gaining entry into the field since an external researcher observing the seminar could risk indirectly influencing the openness of the participants. The role of university based teacher was only in relation to supervising the student teachers on the bachelor project, and also to help in organizing the dialog seminars. That made the role of researcher clearer for all the involved parties.

To secure anonymity no names are mentioned, and the data has been cross collected from student teachers becoming teachers in grades 1-7 and 5-10. The data for the project has been collected according to the rules drawn up by the Norwegian Social Science Data Standards (NSD). The respondents had the right to withdraw their participation in the project, and also permission was sought for publications of all the quotes that are included.

Respondents

The numbers in the smaller group sessions varied on average there were ten respondents. The respondents in the groups were mostly third year bachelor student becoming teachers in grades 1-7 and 5-10, as well as two to four school based teachers, and one to three university based teachers. It is important to add that the student teachers were together in practice groups of 2-3 for each school based teacher who was supervising. Therefore there were more student teachers than teacher educators in the groups.

Data analysis

Brinkmann (2007) discusses what kind of knowledge interviews can give researchers about the research questions, and posits the idea of two kinds: the doxa-interview and epistemic-interview. Inspired by Socrates' dialogs, Brinkmann (2007) explains that the doxa-interview gives knowledge about the experience and opinions the respondents have, whereas the epistemic-interview can give knowledge that has been found to be valid through conversational and dialectic questioning (Brinkmann, 2007).

The structure of the dialog seminars' clearly created a process where the first stage forced the respondents to share their knowledge. As has been mentioned, the tasks are given to the respondents and they write down what they want to share and participate with in the group. When their note is pulled out they have to clarify to all the participants what the opinion is or what is behind the question being raised. When the conversation naturally fades out, the next note is pulled out and the process repeated until all the participants have shared their contributions. This process can be argued to unfold as an epistemic-type interview (Brinkmann, 2007) where as an example the mutual understanding of action learning received consensus in the end of the group session amongst the respondents. Holstein & Gubrium (1995) argue for a similar process which they name *the active interview,* which builds on a social-constructionist perspective which considers the process of meaning production to be as important for social research as the meaning that is produced (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 4).

The empirical material from the dialog seminars has been systematically organized and analyzed according to methods more commonly used in analyzing data from focus groups (Halkier, 2010). For this project the enactments between the participants was the key focus (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003). The data was first coded according to two variables: *collaboration* and *research and development.* Later, each variable was coded further and *understanding* and *mutual understanding* became important categories.

Results

It was clear that action learning is a complex, and for many, a diffuse concept to understand. Action learning had to be discussed, and different opinions had to be shared before consensus was achieved in the group. Dialog seminars with smaller group sessions seemed to constitute a good collabor-

ative arena, where the structure of the group activity made student teachers, school based teachers and university teachers all participate in knowledge development about action learning.

Unravelling the problem

Action learning is, as has been mentioned, the approach that the student teachers will use for collecting data in the practice schools for their bachelor projects. Therefore, it is important that the concept is clear for all the involved parties. Feedback from several of the participants at the start of the group sessions and after the collective lecture was that action research and action learning were too complicated and diffuse for them to understand:

> *Student teacher (1): I don't understand what this action research is. I thought we were supposed to know this by now.*
> *Student teacher (2): I know! This is like the fourth time we have had a lecture about it and I still don't get it!*
> *School based teacher 1 (supervisor to student teacher 1): So you don't know..?*
> *Well I don't know either so how is this going to work out! (Nervous laughter).*

Several joined in the discussion and the school based teachers explained their frustration, as even with long experience as teachers, with no background knowledge of what action research or action learning was, they felt insecure about their supervisory role in regard to the student teachers. Even after several lectures from the university where researchers lectured about their own action research projects and handouts were given about the concept (Bachelor-handbook), the school based teachers still felt insecure about this, as one of the teachers explained: *"We have had three lectures about action research, and we still don't know what it is. What is our part in this? And why should we know about it?"(School based teacher 3).* The school based teachers were also concerned about the student teachers' opinion about them as supervisors not knowing the concept. One of the school based teachers stated:

> *School based teacher 2: What do you (student teachers) think about us teachers being uncertain about what action learning is?*

The response from the student teachers was that this of course was not reassuring, and they were concerned about the process. Thus, it seemed that the dialog seminar, which was supposed to create a forum for collaboration and understanding, did just the opposite. One of the school based teachers stated:

> School based teacher 2: I think that we need to have a common understanding of what action research is. We need to have a common language before we can talk about changing (practice).

A common language is clearly an expression for the need for an agreed consensus between the involved parties.

Consensus

For the university based teachers, it seemed that loyalty to the teacher education program they are a part of forced them to give an explanation of what action learning was; however, it became clear to everybody in the group that there was no clear understanding from their perspective, either:

> University based teacher 1: Don't get hung up on this action learning. You know that is just to go out and reflect and try something over again. What is important is that you students are supposed to do action research. You are not only doing theoretical reflection, you are supposed to do something about it in practice (out in the school).

Another university based teacher broke into the conversation:

> University based teacher 2: It is learning! Not research (Action learning, not action research).

It seemed that one of the university based teachers had mixed up the terms, because the university based teacher explicitly told the group to stay away from action leaning, and what we interpret to be an attempt to clarify did not do so. At the same time, this seemed to be a clarifying turn for the group. What followed is what we interpret to be a breakthrough in the group dialog, because it opened up for a joint discussion about what action learning is and could be in the bachelor project setting. Further, we interpreted that the understanding the participants had about action learning

changed during the group session and how a consensus of understanding seemed to occur. From the participants being uncertain and not knowing what action learning was to a mutual understanding in the group session in the end is illustrated by school based teacher 2 and university based teacher 2:

> *School based teacher 2: Well I guess if the question is to change something out in the schools, it isn't hard to find something. You (student teachers) probably have already seen a lot of things you (student teachers) have reacted to and said "what's the point about that?" And you can then easily question it and try out something new. Like okay, what didn't you like, and what can I do to change it.*
>
> *University based teacher 2: Well I don't know that much about action learning but I think it is about what concept of knowledge you have. I think when you get into the process of doing it, it becomes clearer. It is about reflecting, and that is something we do out in the classroom all the time, developing and improving. And now the students are going to do it. I mean we all have to understand and know what we are doing.*
>
> *School based teacher 2: …So if it makes us see different things out in the school, something we wonder about or want to do something about, could this (action learning) be a systematic way of doing it? Maybe we all should reflect about this (I interpret this to mean colleagues at the school) and you who are pedagogy teachers (university based teachers) could do the same thing afterwards and continue the development (with the student teachers).*

Several of the student teachers claimed that action learning had become clearer to them even after a start where none of the group members seemed to be sure. As one of the student teachers responded:

> *Student teacher 3: It is getting clearer. Finally I got it!*

This group discussion with approximately ten participants came to an agreed consensus on what they meant by action learning at what it was supposed to be with regard to the bachelor projects.

Discussion

Action research has been reported in the literature to be problematic for practitioners to grasp before they actually do it, and then gradually they learn the concept by seeing it unfold (Ponte, Beijard, & Ax, 2004; Smith & Sela, 2005). Clearly, this study also found this, and one of the university based teachers also reflected on the fact that it might be clearer when doing it: "*Well I don't know that much about action learning, but I think it is about what concept of knowledge you have. I think when you get into the process of doing it, it becomes clearer*" (University based teacher 2).

The concept of action learning was difficult for the group to understand at the beginning of the seminar. After several lectures they reported that they still did not understand the concept. Some of the school based teachers were frustrated and angry with the idea, and wanted clear descriptions of their responsibility with regard to supervising the student teachers when it came to action learning. They were concerned about what the student teachers would think about them not knowing the concept. However, it seemed that the dialog seminar cleared up some of the frustration and made room for different opinions to be discussed. Several pointed out that it felt more secure to ask questions in the smaller groups than in the big group after lectures about action learning.

The structure of the smaller group seminars, discussed in more detail under the section *Data analysis,* encouraged the participants to join in the discussion. Since every note was pulled out and read out loud by one person designated as secretary of the group, there was room for remaining anonymous. Still, even though the group had an unevenly balanced power dimension, it did not seem to be a factor in hindering the discussion. All the participants wrote down notes with questions about their understanding of action learning, and when the note was pulled out they took over the secretary's job and read the notes themselves. This can indicate that the environment in the small groups felt comfortable and opened up for everybody to join in with their opinions, though there seemed to be a need for the university based teachers to give the 'correct' explanation of what action learning was. It could be interpreted that the university based teachers felt a responsibility to have knowledge about action learning since they represented the hosts, the university. Still, in the process of negotiating understanding, everybody joined in the discussion.

Blumer (1969) stresses that the meaning of a *thing* (such as action learning) for an individual develops and grows out of the ways in which other individuals acts towards him or her with regard to the *thing.* He

suggests that the meaning a *thing* has for an individual derives from the social process of people or groups of people interacting. Objects, people, situations, and events do not in themselves possess meaning; meaning is rather conferred on these elements by and through human interaction (Berg, 2001, p. 8). Maybe by sharing opinions about action learning in an interactive process a stronger understanding of the concept can be created.

Postholm & Moen (2011) explicitly point to the fact that R&D also has a practical operational aspect with regard to teachers. Teachers need to develop a research attitude towards their own practice, when systematically and continually aiming for improvement (Postholm & Moen, 2011; Tiller, 2006). Hall (2009) argues that a resilient professional identity is supported by a degree of autonomy in how teachers teach and how teachers are allowed to develop own practice. She argues that it is therefore important that teachers *own* an understanding of the research in their practice (Hall, 2009). Postholm & Moen (2011) also point to the fact that teachers need to find an interest in research based in their own research interests, and adds that teachers need to develop their research interests in a free and democratic process. If the research interest feels enforced, it rarely gets incorporated into practice (Postholm & Moen, 2011). It might be that developing mutual knowledge and understanding of action learning in smaller group processes will create the feeling in practitioners of owning the research themselves and maybe continuing research processes on their own.

Conclusion

The aim for this article was to explore how knowledge about action learning is expressed and understood among the participants in seven dialog seminars throughout the bachelor year of a new teacher education pilot project in Norway. Dialog seminars seem to be an arena where the structure is good for collaboration, and perhaps for developing mutual knowledge about action learning for the purpose of the student teachers' bachelor projects.

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