Chapter 4
Managing the Tension Between the Known and the Unknown in Knowledge-Building: The Example of the Play-Responsive Early Childhood Education and Care (PRECEC) Project

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Abstract This project was aimed at taking on the challenge of developing a *didaktik* for preschool, through empirical and theoretical work. The design was built on teachers' own video observations of play activities in preschool, where they themselves were participants. Teachers, their principals, and researchers met regularly at the university to collaboratively discuss the video recordings. On these occasions the researchers also provided further education on theoretical concepts useful for analysing play activities in preschool, such as metacommunication and intersubjectivity. The outcome was the theorisation of Play-Responsive Early Childhood Education and Care (PRECEC), consisting of a coherent conceptualisation of teaching, as a responsive activity, and play, as something participants signal to each other through shifts between communicating and acting as is and as if. A challenge we discuss in this chapter is how to deal with the 'unknown' in a practice-based research project, i.e. not only reproducing knowledge (further education) but also, critically and at the same time, developing new knowledge (research).

Keywords Play-responsive teaching · Field access · Play · Further education · Teachers' agency

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Introduction

In an often-cited article on what is commonly referred to researcher-practitioner cooperation in educational research, Wagner (1997) points out that two critical arguments have been raised in the field. The first is that when teachers are not involved in the research process, it is hard to generate findings that are useful for practitioners. Phrased in other terms, the research will lack pragmatic validity (Nuthall, 2004). The second critical argument Wagner (1997) highlights is that there exist asymmetries of power in educational research. According to this reasoning, the practitioners (i.e. the teachers, in Wagner's view) therefore become the 'oppressed', and it is the oppressor (i.e. the researcher) who has the right to define the problems of investigation. The critique summarised in these two arguments has resulted in a development in the educational research field towards more collaborative projects and greater parity between researchers in academia and teachers in schools or preschools. A benefit of this kind of new research, mentioned in the literature, is that it may help to reduce the so-called theory-practice divide, due to its emphasis on action and research (Bevins & Price, 2014). In this chapter, an example of one such research project will be presented and discussed. The aim of the particular project was to take on the challenge of developing a *didaktik* for preschool, through empirical and theoretical work. It started in late 2015 as a pilot project and then received funding for 2016–2019 from the Swedish Institute for Educational Research.[1] Participants initially included 11 researchers from 3 universities, as well as principals and preschool teachers from 7 preschool units. The *didaktik* that the project resulted in is referred to as Play-Responsive Early Childhood Education and Care, hereafter PRECEC (Pramling et al., 2019). The issues to be investigated in this chapter are how collaborative this collaborative project actually was and what its different aims were. These issues will be scrutinised by looking back at (i) the initial phase of the project, when field access was negotiated; (ii) the realisation phase, when the cooperation was elaborated; and (iii) the project's outcomes. The purpose is to contribute critical reflections in relation to the now well-established form of collaborative research in which representatives from academia and schools/preschools carry out projects together and to the methodological research within the field.

Field Access: From Whose Perspective?

For obvious reasons, educational institutions are often in focus in educational research, and in this anthology (Wallerstedt et al., 2023), the institution in question is Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (in Sweden often referred to simply

as preschool). The main actors in this kind of research are preschool teachers. Richard and Bélanger (2018) have conducted a study in which they scrutinise the reasoning that underpins teachers' decision to take part in research projects or refuse to do so. Reviewing the literature on what is usually conceptualised as 'field access', they identify some factors of importance. In the first place, it is crucial to establish a relationship between the researchers and other participants that is characterised by a sense of trust. Trust is a necessary condition for several reasons. One that Richard and Bélanger point out is that, as teaching practices can sometimes be private in nature, teachers taking part in a study can have the sense they are being evaluated. This can be a reason why teachers refuse to participate, and therefore trust among participants is important. It has also been shown to be crucial that teachers have an interest in the subject of research. Lacking such interest, or already having a heavy workload, are possible reasons for declining invitations to take part in research projects.

In order to reflect on how the project leading to the theory of PRECEC started, I will go through the very first emails between the preschool principal and one of the researchers at the university. In these few messages, the different perspectives on the emerging aim of the project are revealed:

August 23, 2015: Email from preschool principal to researcher

> There are a number of us preschool principals in the district who have Developmental Pedagogy as a common ground for our work. Most of the time, we feel somewhat lonely, and we're jealous looking at other networks that Reggio preschools are part of. Is there any possibility that the university could help set up a network for us? We're willing to contribute so that it can become a reality. (my translation)

Two things are important in this email. First, the initiative for the collaboration comes from the preschools. However, the driving force here is the preschools' administration rather than the teachers. This fact has both its strength and weaknesses. One could assume that the preschool principals' support for the project is a guarantee that the issue of workload is taken care of. The principal writing the email above explicitly says that they (the leadership) are willing to contribute in necessary ways. That she turns to the university with her question is also a sign of some basic sense of trust. However, what we do not know is how widespread and anchored the interest in the focus of the suggested collaboration, in this case Developmental Pedagogy (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008), is among the teachers. One aspect that Richard and Bélanger (2018) point out in their study is that the school administration sometimes plays an authoritarian role, forcing teachers to participate without considering their views. Without saying that this was the case here, it is important to note that collaboration with preschools (or schools) arguably needs to be viewed in a differentiated way – several actors are involved, teachers as well as principals (and sometimes others), and each of them can have their own specific agenda and motives.

The second aspect of interest in this first email, in relation to 'field access', is that it can be regarded as a two-way process. Discussing research, this is typically referred to as researchers getting access to the field of practice; but here, it could be

interpreted as the practitioners seeking access to the field of academia. Richard and Bélanger (2018) have found that teachers see participation in projects as an opportunity to interact with the research community. Even if the initial question from the principal does not concern a research project, it is clear that she has positive expectations of the university as a possible partner in a collaboration. In the first response from the researcher, the different motives for collaboration become visible:

August 25, 2015: Email from researcher to preschool principal

> The group I met yesterday was very excited, but they think we should start on a small scale with fewer preschools. See attachment, how we reason; and if you think this could be a way to start, that would be nice. We'll just call you partner preschools as a start. If we do it this way, we feel that both of us will win. We have a common problem that we want to solve. (my translation)

In the attached letter, it was stated:

> In recent years, theoretical frameworks for understanding how to facilitate children's learning in preschool, in the form of Developmental Pedagogy (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008) and Variation Theory (Magnusson, 2013; Thulin, 2011), have been developed. Teaching as a concept has also been theorised in relation to the context of preschool, a concept that has not previously been common in relation to preschool (Doverborg et al., 2013; see also, Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2011). This theorisation is still undergoing formation. Organising in terms of themework in preschool has been elaborated (e.g. Doverborg et al., 2020), while play as a ground for children's learning in preschool has rather receded into the background. Play now needs to become a figure in further research and theorising. The goal of the project (and network) planned here is to generate and share new knowledge about how a *didaktik* for preschool can be developed in a way that does not exclude play. Wherein play consists, and how play comes into play in activities in preschool where teachers intend to develop children's understanding and abilities, we do not presently know enough about. One may imagine that teachers contribute to children's play and learning through entering as participants in ongoing play, through relating to children's play and contributing to further developing it, or through establishing new frames of play for children to act within. Identifying different ways in which play is treated in relation to learning, and particularly with a *didaktik* interest, what is made into content, and how this is done in these activities need to be investigated. It is also possible to see play and learning as a potential field of tension – however, what tensions come into play needs to be studied in actual settings. (my translation)

It can be noted here that what is formulated by the researchers in the attachment is a tentative research idea. This was before the actual research application had been written and, of course, before the project was carried out. Today we can see that we have changed our view from treating play as something that one can base teaching on to seeing teaching as responsive to play (Pramling, et al., 2019). Two days later the preschool principal responds, in this email declaring her interest in their becoming a partner preschool, as suggested by the researcher; but at the same time, she clarifies her view of what it means and what she hopes to gain:

August 27, 2015: Email from preschool principal to researcher

> Over the last 2 years we've been working with formulating an overall idea and have developed a working and developmental organisation, connection to theory, and systematic quality management. Our next step, this year, is to assign a preschool teacher at each preschool with the task of leading the process there. Together with us, they will deepen our work with

theory and systematic quality management. […] What we need right now, for us and the process leaders, is increased knowledge in Developmental Pedagogy. The next step could absolutely be what you describe – play-based *didaktik*. […] What we want from a network, from our perspective, we who work with Developmental Pedagogy, is a newsletter about new research, lectures, and an annual conference, possibilities for exchange with other preschool principals, and workshops where preschool teachers have discussions with personnel from other preschools. (my translation)

In this exchange of messages, the different agendas for collaboration emerge. They can be explained in light of what Bevins and Price (2014) write in their study on collaborations between academics and teachers: teachers work within an environment that is regulated by certain goals and policies. For example, preschools have the Education Act and a curriculum to follow. This creates a strong culture of accountability requirements. We can see this in the principal's emphasis on systematic quality management, which is typically the principal's remit. The university, Bevins and Price (2014) write, is typically less structured. Researchers can, to a greater extent, choose what work they carry out. As Bevins and Price state, 'teachers may play an important role in contributing to the development of knowledge rather than being relegated to consumers of generated knowledge' (p. 271). An interpretation of this statement could be that it is the researchers who relegate teachers to a subordinate position, but it is noteworthy that it could be the other way around, with the teachers putting themselves in a position as consumers of knowledge. In this case, the researcher argued that 'we have a common problem that we want to solve', but here 'we' is a rhetorical statement. It is the researchers who have decided what this common problem is. Even if the principal recognises the problem, which can be seen when she writes 'the next step could absolutely be what you describe', she still persists that it is a newsletter, lectures, and an annual conference that they are asking for.

The Swedish Institute for Educational Research, which came to be the funding agency for this project, has as one of its requirements that the challenges that a project addresses need to be grounded in the questions of the teachers. In the application for our project, we argued that this was the case, but reflecting on these initial emails, it becomes clear that the very first turns in the communication consisted of different wishes: one that was interested in searching for the unknown (how play and learning can be integrated in teaching) and one that concerned searching for clarifications of what was already known – spreading the established knowledge about Developmental Pedagogy. However the latter arguably does not constitute a research problem, and based on this initial communication, a common research interest was gradually established between the partners. In the following emails, we will find that they come to a kind of agreement:

August 28, 2015: Email from researcher to preschool principal

We have come to understand that teachers generally don't understand how play is connected to learning, and this is what we want to investigate further, both to understand and to develop Developmental Pedagogy so that this becomes clear. To be able to do this, we need help from those who work in practice, to be able to get better at showing what it is. […] We want to work something out together with you, not that we have the answers – instead, that's what we're searching for together. (my translation)

September 3, 2015: Email from preschool principal to researcher

> We agree with what you write, and we find play-based *didaktik* very interesting and excit-
> ing. What we struggle with in practice is to get the teaching – the aims – integrated in play
> […]. Can we meet up to talk more about what this can mean for both of us? Looking for-
> ward to an exciting collaboration! (my translation)

The first meeting between the researchers and preschool teachers took place in
December 2015 at the university. Before this first meeting, the teachers had video-
recorded play episodes from their preschools – recorded by the teachers themselves,
at the initiative of the researchers. At the meeting, the teachers and researchers dis-
cussed the recordings, and the principals met with one of the researchers for their
own discussion. The first meeting turned out well, and thereafter these meetings
were held about six times a year, in various forms, for 3 years. In the second year,
the project also received funding and came to include more preschools from another
region in Sweden.

An Academia-Preschool Cooperation: Of What Kind?

It could be argued that all educational research in schools involves cooperation of
some kind between researchers and teachers, whether implicit or explicit (Wagner,
1997). The cooperation can be categorised as extractive, clinical partnership, or co-
learning agreement (see also Björklund & Palmér, this volume, Chap. 3). What dif-
fers between these types is mainly who the agent of inquiry is and what the object
of inquiry is. In an extractive cooperation, the researchers use the school setting for
'extracting knowledge', and it is not necessary that the participating teachers under-
stand the purpose of the research. In a clinical partnership, a shared understanding
of purpose is worth striving for, since practitioners are engaged in inquiry, even if
the researcher is the agent of it. The practitioners can assist the researcher, but are
still the ones who are being studied. In a co-learning agreement, the form of work is
more interactive, and the asymmetries are reduced. The teachers and researchers
work together and engage in both action and reflection. It could be argued that
reflection is also an action, but this is the term Wagner uses to describe the different
types of contributions. Wagner stresses that these forms of cooperation are not cat-
egorically positive or negative; rather, it depends on the aim of the research. But in
a co-learning agreement, both teachers and researchers can be regarded as change
agents, active in different institutions, which ensures change initiatives in separate
arenas. This means that teachers share their new knowledge with their colleagues,
as do the researchers in the research community.

Zipin and Hattam (2009) argue, based on a discussion of action-based research,
that it is important to scrutinise the partial perspectives of the distinct participants,
especially one's own. Wagner's (1997) categories can be useful in this, given our
role as researchers in the PRECEC project. It is tempting to say that our cooperation
was a co-learning agreement. But even if we framed it, in Wagner's words, as 'a
shared research enterprise' in which 'both are engaged in action and reflection'

(p. 16), this can be questioned. As mentioned, the design we followed entailed meeting at the university, where we watched and analysed video recordings that the preschool teachers had brought. The meetings also came to include lectures by the researchers, which served as starting points for the next rounds of video recordings. For example, one lecture was given about narrative play, and we ended that session by asking the teachers to bring recordings of such play scenarios to the next meeting. The lecture topics were chosen based on the researchers' knowledge from previous studies in preschool. They were also planned in response to what came up in the discussions with the teachers. But when did the actual analysis take place, if we consider analysis from a researcher's perspective? To conduct an Interaction Analysis (Derry et al., 2010; Jordan & Henderson, 1995), which was the main method of analytical work we applied in the studies, careful transcripts on a turn-by-turn basis are required; and these transcripts were made later, by the researchers. The teachers left the recordings with the researchers, and in this sense our roles were clearly separated. The cooperation might better be described as a clinical partnership, in which 'efforts are made by both practitioners and researchers to develop a shared understanding of their separate but complementary enterprises' (p. 15).

Returning to the need for trust, previously discussed in relation to field access, it is important to also consider it when reflecting on how the cooperation turned out. In a literature review by Vescio et al. (2008) on professional learning communities, they state that 'successful collaborative efforts include strategies that "open" practice in ways which encourage sharing, reflecting and taking risks necessary to change' (p. 84). Even if what is discussed in the present chapter is a research project, the meetings at the university functioned as a professional learning community, where teachers showed their work to each other and shared their thoughts on it. In the collaboration, a sense of trust is a necessary condition for the teachers to open up. In this project this meant showing themselves to be players, taking part in children's activities in preschool that were open-ended in nature. Of particular interest in the study were situations in which the teachers did not have control over the situation, that is, a distinct plan for what should happen. This was a precondition for searching for the unknown, both in concrete terms (what would happen in the open-ended play) and metaphorically (trying to find a new way of considering the teacher's role in preschool, that is, the desired empirical data that we could analyse to generate research results). Video-recording oneself in situations of these kinds, and showing it to colleagues, researchers, and even principals, can be seen as taking a risk. Because the teachers had the courage to do this, the project could be seen successful in this regard. After a year had passed, in a reflection note, a teacher in the project wrote the following:

> It's very helpful to see yourself and other teachers on film. To see how we integrate with the children becomes so clear. It's a very useful tool for us to make our practice visible. We should prioritise using this media even more to document and analyse our practice. You don't need that many films to enable a good dialogue around what, how, and why. But it's also hard to see yourself! It's been good that we've had the same tasks to study, so that we don't video-record just anything. It's been easier to watch others' data. There's been a kind of pressure that we should produce something, and there hasn't always been time for it. When you lack time for planning, the results will easily fail. (my translation)

This note can tell us something about the teacher's experience. She appreciated working with video as a method, even though she felt it was hard to watch herself. The collegial conversations, and the observations being structured around specific themes, were helpful.

In order to create an environment of trust, one could turn to Bevins and Price's (2014) model of successful collaborations. They find that both task support and team support are needed. Task support means that participants have enough time to engage in the project and a fair workload. Again, this was facilitated in the PRECEC project by the principals' active involvement. Team support concerns the group dynamic, mutuality, and cohesion. It could be argued that, in this project, this was mainly the researchers' responsibility. Actions taken to create this mutuality included live-in seminars, where the teachers as well as the researchers presented tentative findings. The researchers presented analysis and conclusions, and the teachers presented how they had changed their everyday work with the children in preschool. Giving voice to 'both sides' was a way of acknowledging the developments resulting from the project in the different fields of research and preschool practice. This also offered an opportunity to articulate one's own perspective and receive feedback. It should be noted that this also required a sense of trust in the researchers. Had we conducted an analysis that made sense to the teachers, did they recognise their own work? Did we succeed in presenting pragmatically valid results? The teachers became our referees in this respect. Richard and Bélanger (2018) find that one obstacle teachers experience in applying knowledge from research is that the specific language used is unfamiliar to them. That the project went on for a longer time may have helped in building a common vocabulary for communicating about what was happening in the analysed play scenarios.

Outcomes of the Project

We have claimed that one of the project's outcomes was the theorisation of PRECEC (Pramling, et al., 2019), consisting of a coherent conceptualising of teaching, as a responsive activity, and play, as something participants signal to each other through shifts between communicating and acting as is and as if. This theorisation was grounded in different theoretical fields, such as psychology, communication studies, and education, but equally important is that it was grounded in the empirical analysis of activities taking place in preschool. This analysis was only possible thanks to the clinical partnership with teachers, actively supported by principals. In Bevins and Price's (2014) list of benefits of action research, one thing they mention is the possibility to reduce the so-called theory-practice divide (for a discussion of this somewhat problematic division, see Pramling & Wallerstedt, this volume, Chap. 12). Action research will support the development of theory specifically to inform practice (e.g. the practice of teaching in preschool), which is contextual. Elliot (2009) reflects on this matter from an epistemological point of view, arguing that it is time to abandon the view of scientists and practitioners (e.g. teachers) as being

separated by a tight boundary. The tradition of educational research, he points out, is grounded in phronesis – the kind of wisdom relevant to practical action, implying good judgement. Phronesis can be contrasted to theoria, which to Plato meant contemplation, speculation, and 'looking at'. Educational theory must be practically valid and grounded in teachers' shared 'practical understanding'. From a postmodern view, this can be contested, as theory has come to be associated with essential and unchanging truth, according to Elliot. He claims that phronesis as a mode of practical reasoning can also capture the meaning of theoria. Three aspects of theoria in educational action research can be pointed out: (1) It is a process of reasoning that yields 'universal knowledge'. (2) It constructs a clear and systematic view of its subject matter. And (3) it enables the prediction of future possibilities (p. 32). Elliot argues that research conducted in collaboration with practice, as discussed in this chapter, can be 'of universal significance by throwing light on possibilities for action in other situations' (p. 35). This is what he argues should be described as theory.

In line with Elliot's argumentation, the result of our project is new theory. But it also resulted in a network, eagerly monitored by the principals (see the initial emails, above). The network has today grown into a platform for participating preschools all over the country. On the digital platform, recorded lectures are posted. Teachers present to each other at regular seminars, and there is an annual conference at which both teachers and researchers share new insights. However, the initial tension still remains. The teachers and principals ask for further education, and the researchers look for further possibilities to identify, investigate, and get funding for new topics of research. Hence, a collaborative project, with teachers and researchers working together, may always be followed by a division in motives, even if the overall goal is the same: a developed preschool teacher profession and a preschool that serves a sustainable future. This division should not necessarily be taken as sign of insufficient quality but perhaps even the opposite, collaborating without reducing differences (i.e. no homogenisation).

Conclusion

This chapter contains a number of critical reflections that can contribute to the methodological field of research conducted in close collaboration with schools and preschools. In sum, these are the following:

– Talking about researchers and practitioners, as is common in the field, is blunt terminology. 'Practitioners' often entail different professions, in this case preschool teachers and preschool principals.
– Field access should be regarded as a two-way process. While researchers may need access to the field of preschools, preschool teachers and principals also need access to academia.

– In order to create an environment of trust, one can turn to Bevins and Price's (2014) model of successful collaborations. They find that both task support and team support are needed. Task support means that participants have enough time to engage in the project and a fair workload. Again, this was facilitated in the PRECEC project by the principals' active involvement. Team support concerns group dynamic, mutuality, and cohesion. It could be argued that in this project, this was mainly the researchers' responsibility. Actions taken to create this mutuality included live-in seminars, where the teachers as well as the researchers presented tentative findings.

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