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Peer Review Network Applying Intelligence to Social Work Education

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Executive summary

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Table of contents

Partner: University of Akureyri, Faculty of Law and Social Sciences

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Organization: The University of Akureyri, founded in 1987, is a public institution of higher education that now comprises six academic faculties: Law and Social Sciences, Information Technology, Natural Resource Sciences, Health Sciences, Education, and Management. Bachelors degrees are granted in all faculties, and a certain number of masters-level programs are offered. Students currently number approximately 1,500. The University of Akureyri offers quality education and is a leader in distance learning. The Faculty of Law and Social Sciences was established in 2003. The Faculty of Law and Social Sciences reports to the Rector and the University Council and is headed by the Dean of the Faculty, who chairs the Faculty Meeting, which is the body of highest authority within the Faculty. It offers a BA and professional degrees in Law, and BA degrees in Psychology, Journalism, Social and Economic Development, and Modern Studies. The Faculty plans to develop a program in Social Work.

Aims: The purpose of the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences of the University of Akureyri is to offer undergraduate-, and eventually graduate-level, university education in law and certain areas of social science, and to be a center for research in the relevant fields.

Teaching activities: The Faculty of Law and Social Sciences offers innovative teaching in the areas of Law, Social Sciences (Psychology, Social and Economic Development, Journalism and Media Studies), and Modern Studies and stimulates and supports research in those areas.

Supporting Activities: The research profile of the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences is varied, due to the multiplicity of academic areas within the faculty. Major research projects in health psychology and in drug and alcohol use in youngsters are in progress, and smaller projects include studies of the psychology of vision, human rights issues, gender equality issues, Icelandic NGO's, the psychology of cruelty, anti-semitism and the halocaust, rural news media and the organization of social services.

Project role: In the PRAISE project University of Akureyri has worked with other partners on the experimentation with virtuous circles. The university has also worked on developing a framework for analysis of the case studies.

Local Experience – Akureyri

This chapter describes the planning, process and impact of the University of Akureyri experience in experimenting with the PRAISE methodology. It starts with a brief picture of the social and cultural context in Iceland before describing the process of initiating the project in Akureyri and Reykjavík. The experience on the project focused mainly on narrative work in the virtuous circles and the production of case studies for the database. The narratives are described in some detail in this chapter and an analysis of the quality and potential use of the case studies for professional training is presented. Although our period of experimentation has been short, the work on the project has had a significant impact on those involved and it is our intention to continue with the PRAISE methodology as we work towards providing a social work programme at the University of Akureyri.

Icelandic context

Iceland is a modern welfare state which follows the Nordic model of social policy and welfare provision. In line with other Nordic countries, the state in Iceland provides preventive services such as: paid parental leave, quality public child care, free or low cost education and health care, and income security in the form of housing allowance, child allowance and child support (Kristinsdóttir, 1991); (Freysteinsdóttir, 2005).

As in most of Europe, Iceland is experiencing the social changes and increasing demands commonly theorised as driven by globalisation, market forces and stakeholding (Trevillion, 1997); (Midgley, 2004). These social changes can be very briefly listed as: an increased differentiation in the life circumstances of children; increased heterogeneity in the ethnic backgrounds; the growing significance of information technology; increasing concerns about risk in relation to children; and an overall decline in community and family networks and thus in the informal support systems available to respond to the increasing concerns (Parton, 1994); (Giddens, 1990); (Beck, 1992). These changes place pressure on social care practitioners who strive to meet the goals of the system within restricted resources. This is a shared experience across Europe as the provision of welfare services is increasingly driven by market forces. The interesting aspect of these changes in Iceland is the rather special circumstances in this very small society.

Icelandic modernisation was a very rapid process. Within a few decades in the mid 1900s Iceland was transformed from a poor economy based on subsistence agriculture and local fishing to a wealthy, modern, technologically advanced consumer society. The changes were so rapid that there was little opportunity to adjust socially and culturally. Children's experiences of family life changed and this affected their personal and social development (Bjornsson et al 1977 cited in Kristinsdóttir, 1991); (Kristinsdóttir and MacDonald, 2003). Traditional child rearing patterns were disrupted but parents did not realise this was happening. The consequent social changes caught people by surprise at family, community, public

and political levels (Kristinsdóttir, 1991). Now the problems are evident and demands for solutions are increasing. As one participant in the project said,

"my feeling is that the landscape is changing. With globalization children are confronting new kind of problems, for example, drug and alcohol abuse is increasing, more children are identified with developmental and behavioural problems. The demand from the society is getting stronger that these children should get help from the authorities. Groups involving parents and relatives are being established to insist on solutions for those children. The gap between rich and poor seems to be growing in Iceland and many problems are connected with that"

The growing disparity of conditions in a small, close knit country used to an egalitarian society is painful, especially for those who observe and work with the consequences for those who are excluded.

Demography

Iceland has a population of just 200,000 people (Statistics Iceland 2000). If the population was distributed evenly over the whole island there would be 2.6 inhabitants per square kilometre. In fact the majority of Icelanders live in a relatively restricted area and 62.4% of the nation lives in the capital city (Statistics Iceland 2003). The population distribution in Iceland has an important bearing on the provision of social services to families in Iceland. Outside the city of Reykjavík and the surrounding conurbation, the population of Iceland is very dispersed, with the second largest town being Akureyri in the North, which has about 15,000 inhabitants. A large proportion of the welfare work is therefore administered by Reykjavik and the surrounding areas (80%) and there is a concentration of resources and services in the south west. It is difficult for the small, more remote areas to attract qualified staff and there is a shortage of qualified social workers. The provision of specialist services is a general problem for the remote areas and families with particular problems have to travel or even move to obtain the services they need. Another effect of the special demographic profile is that confidentiality, sources of information and communication can become very problematic. This is expanded on below as understanding and managing this emerged as an aspect of professional competence in the case studies.

Ethnic and cultural homogeneity has been a characteristic of Iceland but this is changing quite rapidly. The total population of non-Icelandic residents rose from 1.8% in 1995 to 3.5% in 2003. Iceland has also substantially increased the number of refugees and asylum seekers accepted into the country due to a change in government policy in the 1980s. There are concerns about the situation of some children from minority ethnic groups. The lack of progress of some children in school is raising questions about the availability of support and access to appropriate services. The need for action to promote racial understanding and tolerance is also

beginning to be recognised (Save the Children Iceland 2003). We discussed just one narrative focused on work with refugees and this was based on an experience in Latvia. We would have liked to explore this further but this did not prove possible within the timescale and remains as work to be done in the future.

Social work profession and training

The term "social worker" is a legally protected title in Iceland. There are approximately 300 members of the Association of Icelandic Social Workers. Most of them are involved in the field of social services, the other major area being health services. Many work alongside other professionals including: nurses, medical practitioners, psychologists, special teachers, school counsellors, social pedagogues and medical practitioners. The University of Iceland has provided a four year degree programme in social work since 1978 and has recently started a Masters programme (Júlíusdóttir, 2000)

Initiating the project in Iceland

The project was launched at an open meeting held at University of Akureyri on 20 September 2004. This meeting was held on the third day of the project seminar hosted in Iceland. Invitations were sent to all Social Services Directors and to all social workers encouraging them to participate in the project and inviting them to attend the meeting. Cooperative links were already in place with the Department of Social Work at the University of Iceland and staff from the department and students on the Masters programme were invited to attend the meeting.

In planning this meeting it was important to make sure that we could explain the project methodology in a way that would be readily understood by the audience. We used two connected concepts: 'reflective space' and 'action research' to help us begin the work and encourage participation.

Influenced by Donald Shön's work (Shön, 1983; Shön, 1987) many texts highlight learning through reflection as an essential requirement for all professionals at all stages of learning and practice. "Reflection helps professionals to generate competing hypotheses about the nature of the problem and what to do about it; and to define their evidence base from relevant theory and research" (Jones and Gallop, 2003: 103).

Action research involves the collective, self reflective inquiry of participants in a situation to develop understanding of what people do and why and how they do it. The action research approach is particular helpful for understanding the often confusing, ambiguous and unpredictable world of social work. The action research process is closely linked to its context and insider knowledge and initiatives are of central importance in producing both practical solutions and new knowledge (Alston

and Bowles, 1998). The participative, qualitative and practical aspects of the approach seemed to match the PRAISE project philosophy and objectives very well and helped us to feel that we could 'do it'.

Response to the project

The public meeting generated a lively debate with project partners interacting with local participants to explain and explore the potential impact of the project in Iceland. By the end of the meeting initial plans had been made for two potential virtuous circles, one in Akureyri and one in Reykjavík. It was felt to be necessary and important to have two separate circles given the special nature of the national context described above.

The concept of the virtuous circle was unfamiliar to potential participants and the term itself not appealing. However, one participant in the Akureyri did some thinking on this for us and in searching for an Icelandic translation captures our interpretation of the concept as being "about a 'good/trustworthy/honest group/circle' of people that decides to trust each other and talk together about sensitive issues (for one or all participants). Furthermore it includes the intentions 'to set something to think about or to protest or make a new one'"

Development of the circles

As previously stated at the public meeting we agreed to set up two circles and the circle in Akureyri began meeting first. The following sections describe the membership and the general process of meetings.

Akureyri membership

The circle meetings in Akureyri have been facilitated by two experienced social workers from Britain and Latvia. There are three Icelandic participants from the three areas in the northern region, Akureyri, Dalvík and Husavík. The gender composition is four women and one man. All participants are white. Four of the members of the group are social work trained, one trained in Britain and three trained in Norway. The fifth member trained as a social pedagogue in Iceland. The common language of the group is English, so all discussions were conducted in English. The composition of the group is interesting because we each brought different national perspectives and different education and work experiences to the group discussions. We found ourselves quite naturally questioning and comparing values, theoretical backgrounds, and organisational and national contexts during our discussions.

Process

We met once a month for two hours between October 2004 and March 2005. Each meeting took place at the University of Akureyri and lasted for two hours. One member took responsibility for writing a narrative before the meeting. The narrative was discussed in an unstructured way and the discussion was audio recorded and then transcribed by one of the facilitators. The transcription was analysed thematically and a written report produced for dissemination at the next circle meeting. Once the report had been discussed and any necessary amendments made to the narrative the case study was produced to the project format and placed on the CABLE database.

Aim

Our immediate aim was to produce as many case studies as possible within the short time left on the project whilst being faithful to the project methodology. We saw the project as an opportunity to create a reflective space so that we could access our practice experience and advance social work knowledge. Furthermore, we wanted to use this opportunity to build a working relationship between the University and social work practitioners; a relationship that could then become a partnership in developing and providing a social work programme and practice teaching.

We defined narratives as short written stories about critical or problematic events in practice. We saw this as a useful way of relating and explaining the 'what and why' of events and felt that "through narrative reasoning and deliberation it is possible to explore issues and knowledge that arise from professional practice so as to continually inform *and* reform these practices for the purpose of developing professional wisdom" (Noble, 2001).

Membership in Reykjavík

The circle in Reykjavik was set up in December 2004 and met thereafter each month through to March 2005. We used the same model of working and agreed the same aims as agreed by the Akureyri circle. However, the composition of the group was different. It is facilitated by a British social worker and has an all female membership consisting of seven Icelandic social workers who all work in neighbourhood family support teams in the city of Reykjavík. All group members are white. We have also been joined each time by a student social worker on practice placement. The meetings take place at the head office for Reykjavík Social Services and last two hours.

Progress

The professionals in the meetings attended because they had a personal interest in taking part. They were under no obligation from their organisation and received no

reward except personal development. Participation was very active and meetings were described as interesting and enjoyable. The choice of case or event for each narrative was left to the author. Some chose current cases and others reached back in time to experiences from the past that they felt were still critical and relevant.

Description of narratives

The PRAISE project brief was to produce narratives of practice in the field of work with children and families. Specialist areas of concern identified in the project were disability, initial reception of families, and serious problems associated with emotional disaffection.

Betrayal of trust?

This narrative describes involvement with a family which begins with therapeutic work with a young child who was discovered following younger children and trapping them into sexual play. The parents work cooperatively with the social worker.

The social worker senses that the family has many 'secrets' and that there were things kept deliberately from the social worker. Eventually, after a period of therapeutic work with the family, the mother of the child tells the social worker of the history of sexual abuse within the family. The child protection procedures are followed, the police are informed immediately leading to the arrest and imprisonment of a family member. Therapeutic work continues with the mother and her children, but the outcomes are very poor.

This is an example of very good practice in gaining the mother's trust so that she tells the social worker about the history of sexual abuse in order to help her youngest child. Intensive follow up support was also provided but the problems were too complex and the resources for the children insufficient to secure positive long term outcomes for the family. The social worker is left with the feeling of having betrayed a trust.

Children's participation

Two children aged 11 and 13 are attending a case conference arranged to decide what plans should be made to protect them from neglect. They are ashamed of their mother who attends with them because she has a serious alcohol problem. They have been well prepared for attending the conference by their social worker.

The chair of the conference tells the story of negotiating with the boys how they can have their say in the decisions and influence the plans made even though they do not want to come into the meeting. The boys' wishes are listened to and their wish to live with their father is eventually fulfilled. The boys are active participants in the work with the family and when parents are uncooperative they act to help the social worker and child protection coordinator to do their jobs.

Refugee as a resource

The action of this narrative takes place in a refugee detention centre. After 3 months of detention one of the detainees develops depressive behaviour and goes on hunger strike in protest against the conditions of detention. The social worker, newly graduated and newly appointed into a situation with no existing support services other than Red Cross support, takes an ecological system perspective and strength based approach. Through the provision of a supportive network and psychotherapy, and recognition of his own strengths and resources, the refugee is supported in improving not only his own situation but also becomes a representative for others.

Putting children first

The case describes a situation of parental separation in distressing circumstances and the subsequent battle over the residence one of the children. The central concern is when and how to act in circumstances where:

- A father is threatening suicide and violence – threats that must be taken seriously given the circumstances and history
- The child's expressed wishes conflict with the professional assessment of the child's best interests.

Planning for the family

A social worker in a neighbourhood support team is supporting a young single mother to complete her education. The support provided is mainly financial, but once the young woman finds that her new social worker is reliable and consistent she begins to explain her difficulties in relating to and coping with her now two year old child. She tells the social worker that she has been abusing her child in an effort to make him behave. She wants the child to be placed in a foster home for a while to give her a break.

The social worker is very surprised as this information contradicts her assessment of this young woman as a competent and caring mother. The social worker would like to provide additional support services to help her cope and to protect the toddler from further injury. The question is posed: how do you assess the risk to the child in these circumstances and how do you make sure the child is protected. The organisational structure and the procedural arrangements for child protection are that incidents of

child abuse must be reported to the child protection committee and the case must then be handled by a worker from the child protection team. The current worker then has no further involvement with the child until the child protection work is ended.

The narrative focuses on assessment of risk, working in partnership with parents, and the debates about organisational arrangements for child protection and family support.

Working towards social inclusion

A family is "well known" to the education, social services, criminal justice and prison systems, and to the community in the city. A boy spends the first 10 years of his life away from his country and culture of origin then returns and quickly becomes "well known", not for his personal qualities but because he is 'out of control'. He lives life on the edge and remains socially excluded, often in prison, for the next 30 years. The focus of the narrative is on giving this man an opportunity and working towards social inclusion. It highlights system failure and the mechanisms in society which operate to maintain the exclusion of those on the edge of society.

Case study analysis

As already described each narrative was discussed on a circle meeting in an unstructured way. The discussion was audio recorded, the recording transcribed, and the transcription analysed thematically. At this point additional relevant links between theory and practice were added to those already made during discussion. The written record of this analysis was circulated all participants and this facilitated further discussion in the next meeting. Additions and amendments were made to the narrative to create the case study for the database.

Formative needs and formative modules

Each case study was analysed using a simple framework designed for the project. This focused on linking the key concepts of each case study to the practice and learning themes emerging from the case. Practice themes included the application of knowledge from pre-existing theory and knowledge gained from experience. Analysis of learning themes made the theoretical links explicit. The key concepts, practice and learning themes are summarised in table 1.

Table 1 Summary of case studies: practice and learning themes

Case study	Key concepts	Practice themes	Learning themes
		Could include practice knowledge or unknowledge; informing practice; reforming practice; organisational context	Theoretical and/or research work applied Relevance to learning; module development
Betrayal of trust?	Trust, secrets, sexual abuse	Listening to intuition; misconceptions about rural practice; a point of intervention in the "transmission of family violence" (Erooga and Print in Horwath, 2001) produces significant moral dilemmas; social worker feels guilty of betraying trust but continues 'witnessing' the family trauma and trust is maintained.	Cognitive-behavioural model - children learn to abuse and such behaviour can be "un-learned"; models of understanding sexually abusive behaviour – points for intervention to promote protection, assessing parental capacity to meet the needs of abused children, types of therapeutic intervention. Relevant to Masters module or post qualifying advanced training.
Children's participation	Involvement, participation, child protection procedures	Knowledge of procedures and skill in application; Family involvement in formal meetings; children's participation in decision making. Recognising children's competence. Empowering children to participate. Creating a safe space. Making an agreeement.	Theoretical framework: new social studies of childhood emphasising children as actors and children's competence. Principles applied: UN convention on the rights of the child. Research findings applied: Shemming's participation variables. (Shemmings, 1996). Relevant to any module at any level on working with children and families. Developing competency in: assessing and planning; communication and engagement.
Refugee as a resource rather than a threat to society	Crisis assessment, crisis intervention, Refugee, survivor, strength based approach, ecological perspective	Getting in; gaining trust; negotiating position and tensions with detainees, police and other authorities; working at a number of levels: personal, professional, local, community, national and international; operating from a respectful perspective which acknowledges our own	Ecological systems perspective; Strength based approach; crisis intervention. Developing competency in: communication and engagement; assessment and enabling. Relevant to undergraduate social work/care module on models and methods of professional intervention.

		biases and respects others' experience and culture.	
Putting children first	Custody, children's rights, threat, risk	Managing threats of violence and suicide; taking action in threatening situations; Assessing the child's best interests; handling conflict between child's expressed wishes and professional assessment of child's best interests.	Understanding children's experience of family separation; assessing risk in contested custody/residence following parental separation; supporting parents in putting children first and involving their children in planning arrangements.
Planning for family	Attachment, child abuse, risk, support	The nature of social work: uncertainty, confusion and doubt. Working with the organisational and procedural context of family support and child protection; working in partnership with parents	Assessing risk to children (Horwath, 2001; Department of Health, 2000) understanding attachment theory (Howe 1995). Competency: assess and plan; promote, enable, intervene and provide services. Relevant for a child care module.
Working towards social inclusion	Social inclusion; social exclusion; system abuse	The importance of taking a fresh and critical look at families who are 'well-known' to the welfare systems. Providing new opportunities to demolish old destructive 'stories' and move towards new story. Persevering on with a good plan despite setbacks.	Social learning theory helps us make sense of this situation (Bandura, 1986). Ecological perspective and strengths based approach helps us to create more positive expectations and to provide a supportive network for someone who is living 'on the edge.' (Saleeby, 1996). Ideas for *constructive social work* help us think through whether and how to focus on the past (Parton, and O'Byrne, 2000).

Broad themes in context

This section links the more detailed practice and learning themes from the case studies to the social and cultural context described at the beginning of the chapter. This helps to illustrate how the case studies might be used in a learning situation both to focus on competency in action and to link action to the broader context.

A particular aspect of complexity that tends to predominate in statutory social work and is evident in all these case studies is the interplay between organisational complexity and the complexity of service user needs. Social work practitioners need to be able to operate in a very complex environment. Both within their organisations and in the relationships between organisations, policies and systems are changing rapidly and making higher demands on individuals for competence. The social worker is primarily concerned with responding to the needs of individuals, families and communities and these are even more complex than the organisational rules and relationships. However, to respond effectively to these needs, social work practitioners must attend constantly to issues of interdependency in the systems, roles and social structures. In the world of practice then there is the constant tension generated by the professional motivation to recognise and meet individual needs and the need to operate in and through an increasingly complex and always imperfect welfare system. The case studies all focus in some way on this tension and therefore contribute to our understanding of the relationships between individuals and social structures that can be applied to the process of thinking about and making changes.

Social work competence in small communities is of particular concern in the Icelandic context. Whilst the case studies do not focus directly on this aspect of practice, it is mentioned as an aspect of complexity in several cases and was certainly a theme during most of our discussions. This is not just the more obvious special context of social work in a rural area, but is also relevant to work in the urban areas. This is not just because the population of Iceland is small and Icelanders pay close attention to extended family relationships, so people and their circumstances are often easily identifiable even in the larger urban areas. This sense of connection, belonging and understanding is clearly an advantage for those living in close communities. The daily witnessing of each other's lives, the opportunities for contact, the availability of informal support all help to prevent or alleviate individual and social problems (Kristinsdottir, 1991). This is also a source of strength and can be an important basis for finding solutions within the community for particular problems. The social worker's experience of local social policy and of the power hierarchy in small municipalities will help to guide action (Bergström and Fog, 1996). However, there are problems. As Kristinsdottir shows in her research in two small communities in Iceland closeness may prevent people from offering help or informal support may impede permanent solutions. Some people, especially newcomers, are socially isolated even in small, seemingly supportive communities. Indeed, sometimes harsh and rigid judgements of disapproved behaviour may be formed and maintained in spite of evident changes. If they are not careful, practitioners can be seduced into a false sense of knowing. This was raised in the circle discussions and we found that

as Kristindóttir points out, questions must be asked about "how much and what is it is in fact that 'everybody knows' about others? Is it possible that this is an experienced, but false, feeling of transparency and insight,..?" (Kristinsdottir, 1991:205).

Evaluation of the local experience

The local experience of the project was evaluated in focus group meetings with the two circles. Participants in the circle were asked to focus on their brief experimentation with the   project methodology and evaluate their experience both from their own perspectives as experienced practitioners and as a method of contributing the formation of learning modules for social work students.

Use of the narrative method

We could see a number of potential uses of the narrative method in practice and practice learning. We felt it would be helpful in gaining an overall, structured view of complex family casework during a crisis.   It is a useful way of slowing the action. It is a good method for taking stock, analysing methodically and putting the work in context. It could therefore be used within personal or group supervision to facilitate and structure discussion. It could be used to make connections in and sense of complex, rapidly developing situations in group work. It could also be useful as a review method when a case or a particular phase in a case has ended.

From the writer's perspective we found that doing the narrative encourages the writer to make theoretical basis of the work explicit. This helps us to understand 'What is happening here? What has been done and not been done?' It encourages broader reflection on the situation, including from the service user perspective and encourages a focus on solutions. This is particularly important because social workers work under constant pressure and it is difficult to get the chance to reflect.

Discussion of the narratives in the circles led to a wider analysis of individual situations, including for example, organisational issues, system abuse, and a questioning of the assumption about the importance of maintaining the family as private sphere making children more vulnerable. The method encouraged an historical perspective on the case, both in terms of the service user's life experience and in the history and changes in child care practice.

We felt that it worked well to build the connection between the university and the field. The method will bring the education nearer to the field and it will make the education more useful to students. It will keep the university in touch with practice realities and keep the field up to date with research and theoretical developments.

Participants in the project did not identify any weaknesses in the methodology. However, reference to other research suggests that the narratives have an inherent risk of 'over-interpretation'. They are constructed accounts and some of them were constructed a long time after the action. They are 'worked out' points of view and as such they are subjective and partial accounts. Reflection could be restrained at the point of writing, either because the thoughts are difficult to express or have to be dropped to keep within the textual space. The method requires the narrator to be adept at writing (Nygren and Blom, 2001). All these weaknesses are mitigated to some extent by the discussion of the narrative in the circle. This provides an opportunity for other participants to help the narrator talk about the things that were not in the written narrative. The method could be difficult because as one participant put it "it is necessary to have a gifted group leader who is open-minded, analytical, warm hearted and experienced to be able to get the best from the narratives."

Case study evaluation

As outlined in chapter three, Leung identifies four contextual issues as important to computer based learning: topic selection, authenticity, complexity and multiple perspectives. It is helpful here to refer to these issues in an evaluation of the case studies produced by the virtuous circles in Iceland (Leung, 2003)

Each case study tells an interesting story relevant to the social work profession. Each case is a real and not an artificial story, so even though some of the circumstances may seem exceptional, they are believable. Although several cases reach a long way back into the past for their beginning they are all of current interest and deal with problems that social workers are likely to face. The cases are not only authentic, they are also complex. Circle participants felt that it was particularly helpful that they give a view of social work over a period of time. This is helpful for students because when starting out in social work the tendency is to think that you can make a difference more quickly than is usually possible in reality. The case studies show that negotiating solutions with people is more often a long and complex process. Whilst some of the cases reach an answer and are complete none suggest that there is a single answer to the complex problems presented. This encourages a deeper level of analysis, closer to the thinking that social workers must do in practice.

The case studies were produced within the Icelandic context and four of the cases are based on Icelandic social work practice. The physical context, actions and reactions, organisational structures and national context are introduced naturally as the experienced practitioners describe their own practice. At the same time each case study was discussed in a group including participants from at least two different countries of origin, we know that they are of interest and relevance beyond national boundaries. The cases have generality beyond the specific circumstances, organisational structure, and national context of the case. Reading and discussing the cases creates empathy with the central characters which helps us to consider the situation from different perspectives. In summary, they all provide opportunities for

learners of the profession to think in the mode of the discipline and to learn to solve problems as domain experts do.

The experience as a whole is best summed up in the words of one of the participants:

> "this kind of evaluation makes it a lot easier to understand the events and the complicated human feelings and thoughts before, during and after. .. It is good way of understanding, both as an evaluating tool afterwards and as a way of making one stop and think during hazardous work or complicated interaction. It is also highly rewarding to discuss cases that have made an impact on you as a professional with other professionals in the same frame of mind of wanting to learn something new from experiences."

Linking Theory, Practice and Research

It can be argued that to create and teach knowledge which is practical it is necessary to focus not just on pre-existing knowledge, but also on the skills which are used in making it relevant from one situation to another. This involves giving practice experience a more central place in the creation of knowledge. Furthermore it requires different infrastructures and processes that allow greater collaboration between researchers and practitioners and their respective institutions (Fook, 2002).

In international discussion it has proved difficult to reach an agreement about what kind of knowledge social workers use in practice. Is it a rational application of theory or is it 'practice wisdom' (Nygren and Blom, 2001). Evidence suggests that practice wisdom is an important type of knowledge used by practitioners (Fook, 2001). This is knowledge built up as a private store, developed and adapted from many sources, often implicit. It is a combination of theoretical knowledge and practical experience that is difficult to describe and teach. Our only access to this knowledge is likely to be through practitioners themselves. During our discussion of the value of the narrative method for developing learning practitioners in one the circles spoke of their experiences of teaching on the social work programme at the University of Iceland. They said "students ask me how they will apply all this theory in practice and sometimes I have to just say – 'you will know – it comes together with some experience in practice.'" Participants in the circle then shared their different experiences of how it 'came together' in the early days of practice and how supervision and mentoring helped. This is difficult to talk about because we do not have the frameworks with which to discuss it. Although each practitioner found it difficult to express these ideas, they had experienced it and understood it. It seemed

that the work we were doing in the circle was a useful way of reaching towards the tacit understandings of what constitutes competent social work.

Fook reviews the different ways of accessing practice experience and summarises important principles for an inclusive approach to accessing frontline practice. These are listed as: keeping the influence of pre-existing theory to a minimum; gaining as many perspectives on experience as possible; and using a method which fits in well with practitioners own working methods. Our experience of the PRAISE methodology is that it meets these principles well. Pre-existing theories were not applied, but arose from the narrative writer, within discussion or from the thematic analysis. The analysis of the narratives in cross-national groups increased the number of perspectives on the material, and the reflective method of the discussion fits well with practitioners' experiences of individual and group supervision and mentoring in practice (Fook, 2002).

Conclusion

We gained a lot in a short period but were limited by the timescale of the project. Collecting the narratives and creating the case studies is a slow process and it was tempting to attempt to use them and move quickly into designing a module in order to fulfil the expectations of the project. This would not be consistent with the methodology, so we ended our work at this point and considered whether and how we could progress it locally after the project had ended. At the outset concern was expressed that as in so many other projects the work would "leak out into nothing." Recognising the value of the work we have done we are proposing a new local project which aims to develop an elearning module to meet an identified need of practitioners in child and family work in the three municipalites. The project will use the PRAISE methodology to develop the learning materials and the blended learning approach to delivery developed with the PRAISE project.

In our short period of experimentation we found considerable potential in the PRAISE methodology for an inclusive approach to developing social work knowledge and learning. Training social workers involves introducing them to a certain type of knowledge and helping them to master certain ways of thinking and analysing data. Our experimentation with the methodology has been a distinctive social work approach to the study of individual, family and community needs and of how to intervene in complex social situations.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronym	Description