Research circles – a guide

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City of Malmö
Research Circles – A Guidebook

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Foreword

This methodology book is a practical tool to assist school leaders and institutional working groups to apply research as a basis for school development. The National Agency for School Development (MSU), was commissioned by the Swedish Government to work to strengthen the conditions for an improvement in educational goals in areas which have been negatively affected the segregation.

The Agency developed an action plan for the work entitled Better Results and Fewer Differences – *planning for a multicultural approach* 2006-2007. In this plan, different actions which had been undertaken during 2006-2008 were described.

One such action was *To use research for school development* and the Centre for Diversity in Education (RMS) in Malmö was commissioned to undertake the work. An important outcome of the work has been the initiation and creation of Research Circles for school leaders and other educationalists.

An aspect of the cooperation between Malmö University College (MAH) and RMS is the deployment of Dr Sven Persson, a specialist in pedagogy, to RMS to lead the research initiative and, in particular, to strengthen research-based school development. In this work, Sven has led the development of models for research circles together with researchers and teachers.

This methodology textbook result from the MSU commission and summarises the work of the research circles which Sven inspired and which was undertaken by RMS with 15 circles in Malmö and 9 in the rest of the country.

"An important factor in strengthening local conditions in municipalities and schools in their work for meeting the goal in the Dialogue-Municipalities is the more frequent use of research competence in schools to support school leaders and teachers in their work to develop quality in teaching."


Kerstin Larsson
(RMS)
Research Circles - a guide

This report is concerned with the ways in which researchers in universities, practising teachers, and other professionals can acquire new knowledge to promote the development of schools and universities by participating in research circles. It is intended to offer concrete and practical guidance to those who want to start a research circle, but the report also provides a brief summary for establishing a research circle and the scope of its use. The report is based on my own experience of supervision and of research circles (Persson, 2001, 2005, 2007) and on the research circles RMS initiated in Malmö with financial support from the National Agency for School Development. An external evaluation of the local initiative in Malmö, together with internal evaluations, has established the base for discussion of the potential of the research circle as a means of school development.

The report is organised as follows:

» **Part 1** provide an illustration of what a research circle is or can be, followed by a discussion of the potential of a research circle as a means for school development.

» **Part 2** describes how to initiate, realise and evaluate research circles. The most frequently asked questions about research circles are covered here.

In the guide the focus is mostly on research circles for teachers and the terms ‘teachers’ and ‘professionals’ are used interchangeably. However, if the term ‘professionals’ is adopted, then find the application of research circles becomes valid for workplaces other than schools. The concept of ‘school’ in this case includes also pre-schools, pre-school classes, after-school centres, and adult education institutions.

*Sven Persson*
What is a research circle?

The development of research circles is based on the ideal of the provision of education for the working classes through the use of ‘study circles’ for knowledge building. However, what are today called research circles have their roots in the world of the universities in the late 1970s. University courses were introduced for elected union officials as a means of organising and developing the exchange of knowledge between researchers and people active in the unions. The first research circles were established with the aim of facilitating a meeting between research-based and experienced-based knowledge.

The research circle should be built on the principal on ‘reciprocal exchange’ (Nilsson, 1990). In an overview of studies on research circles at the school level, Holmstrand and Härnsten (2003) note that there are twenty-five years of experience of research circles available. More systematic research on research circles, however, has had a limited focus. The starting point is the continuing dialogue between researchers and professionals which can provide the basis for the development of their own practice. The research process seeks to promote a reciprocal influence between the researchers and the professionals so that both might alter their view of the problem.

The result can be that new and broader knowledge is being gained by all participants in the research circle. The professionals1 can use the new knowledge for changing their own teaching or developing part of the work of the school. It can also lead to the finding that there is a need for further research of a problem and new research projects would then be initiated based on the work which has been carried out in the circle.

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1 I use the word “professionals” instead of “practitioners” which is usually found in the literature about research circles because I am critical of the view of the researcher as theoretician and the teacher as the practitioner. For further discussion of this point, see Persson (2007).
New Challenges

Research circles can be found in relatively great numbers around the country, especially, of course, in university cities. It is pertinent to ask why the research circle has been such a popular method for school development. The answer can probably be found in the changes which have taken place in schools and which have had to be met with new knowledge and competences among teachers and other school personnel. I will now briefly mention some of the most important changes in society and the implications they have had for the development of teacher competences.

One important aspect is related to the management of the school. The change from regulated to goal management of schools has broadened opportunities for teachers, but has also increased the demand on them to develop teacher professionalism and the school as a whole. Goal management demands that teachers have sufficient knowledge and competences to examine, control and evaluate their own teaching and all the work that takes place in the school. Less hierarchical relationships, with an emphasis on the responsibility of the teacher to develop the whole school, and more personal meetings demand a new kind of professionalism (Carlgren and Marton, 2000).

Living in a multicultural society is another important factor in the development of teacher competences and the provision of professional development opportunities. The development of a more pluralistic society, characterised by ethnic and cultural diversity, makes demands on teachers’ knowledge and competences (Persson and Tallberg, 2002). Not least, teachers have to employ an intercultural competence in order to meet students and parents. With increased social, cultural and economic inequality, differences in school success rates are also widening, evident in student marks and entrance to the upper secondary school, drop-out rates etc. In times of increased ethnic, cultural and class segregation, it is not possible to talk about the school in the singular form. The ‘school’ has become the ‘schools’ and the ‘teacher’ have become the ‘teachers’.

Taken as a whole, these changes mean that teacher working practices from pre-school to the upper secondary school and adult education are shifting and in a state of constant flux. In order to meet these new demands, the notion of the reflective teacher has been formulated (Schön, 1987, 1988). There was an earlier presumption that teachers developed first through adapting theoretical knowledge and then practising it. This was criticized for being a top-down model of
implementation. It was said that teacher’s should learn and reflect from their own experience. From the 1980s this process came to be known as “reflective practice”. It characterised school development and the degree to which each teacher was developing his/her (critical) thinking became an important question. The capacity to formulate, critically examine, argue and communicate is, therefore, becoming a central feature in the changing work of educationalists.

The research circle – a place for reflection on practice
Consideration of teachers’ reflection on their practice or the development of a model based on reflection on practice is not unproblematic. One may ask how teachers and other professionals, who are facing demands for immediate action, can live up to the ‘reflective teacher’ ideal and what possibilities of time and space they have to reflect on their action. ‘One-off’, sporadic and targeted in-service provision does not offer teachers the possibility to reflect on their own practice. To do this demands time, continuity, meetings and dialogue. The research circle could serve as a place for reflection on practice by offering teachers time and a place to examine their own practice.

Moreover, and this is one of the reasons why the research circles are viewed as a means for school development, studies show that teachers in general do not read about and are not particularly interested in school research. Somekh (1994) comments interestingly that one of the most important reasons why education research and pedagogical research are not used as a tool for development and changing practice in teaching is that most research on the school is decontextualised; when taken outside of its context, teachers are not able to apply it to their own situation. Teachers do not recognise themselves in theses and research reports. Research does not describe the complexity of the teacher’s work, but rather simplifies and reduces it. In the research circle the teacher is offered the possibility of help with analysing the complexity of his/her own work.

The research circle implies new challenges for researchers and challenges traditional ideas about what actually constitutes research. Teachers have previously been viewed as objects for research and the receivers of the knowledge generated from the research (Lagemann, 1996). In the research circle the positions of the researchers and the teachers are closely linked. When the researcher is integrated in a research circle together with teachers in order that together they will seek knowledge about a problem, the researcher is challenging the belief that research is
about teachers. Rather, in the research circle, research is undertaken together with the teachers from a participatory perspective (Heron and Reason, 2001).

Reason (1994) states that participatory research has two purposes. Firstly, it is to produce knowledge and action useful for teachers. The second purpose is to enable teachers to gain a deeper understanding of their own situation through organising their own knowledge. As I will demonstrate below, the purpose of the research circles is to develop and change practice through the knowledge gained.

The purpose of the research circle

The purpose of the research circle is to promote participation in the development of schools and universities by teachers seeking to resolve a problem which they themselves formulate. Research circles involve teachers and schools which have identified the issues they wish to address through research. Research circles are led by researchers from universities. In research circles participants undertake empirical studies which are interpreted and discussed by all participants in the circle in order to reach a deeper understanding of problems which teachers find important. Schools and universities have a reciprocal interest in research circles.

Figure 1. The research circle as mediating arena between university and school
Three arenas

When organising research circles the three arenas involved, each with a different level of interest, purpose and pre-conditions, have to be taken into consideration. The three arenas are universities, schools/preschools, and the research circles themselves. Figure 1 illustrates that the three arenas influence each other reciprocally, but it is the research circle which provides the link between the universities and the schools/preschools. If we assume that all arenas have their own purposes, preconditions and context, it is important to consider these in planning, implementation and evaluation. The research circle has a potential to influence and contribute to the development of schools/preschools as well as of universities, but the key to success in this respect is having the three arenas work together.

The school as an arena

Schools have an interest in developing their work through giving teachers the opportunity to develop competences in areas which correspond to the needs of the school. By ‘competence’ I mean that the teacher’s knowledge is demonstrated in some action or in action readiness. It makes it possible for us to formulate some goals for the research circles. These goals can, at the same time, motivate teachers to participate in a circle. The goals can be described as follows.

Through participation the teacher will acquire the tool to:

» analyse pedagogical occurrences and locate them in a wider context,
» use concepts in order to better understand teaching and other pedagogical work,
» use knowledge about research processes in order to examine pedagogical work,
» read and understand relevant research in an area of interest,
» present his/her knowledge in an appropriate way,
» apply the knowledge

These targets can be seen as a goal to aspire to. The possibility of teachers reaching the goals is dependant upon not only what is happening in the research circle, but also on the conditions prevalent at their own school. In this respect, heads, school leaders and other senior personnel have key functions. Participation in a research circle is stimulating, but demanding, and teachers need support and encouragement in order to devote time to work in the research circle.
The University as an arena

Researchers from universities are participating in the research circles because:

- *new knowledge* is needed about what it means to be a teacher today,
- *relevant questions* based on teachers’ practice need to be asked,
- knowledge and experience from the research circle can be used in *research and in the professional development of new teachers*.

Significantly, we do not know much about how the work of the research circle and the meeting between researchers and the professionals are influencing the university. The lack of a research presence at the School of Education has received criticism from various sources, most recently from the National Agency for Higher Education, in relation to an evaluation of student teachers’ examinations. The School of Education in Malmö has stated that it will develop “practice related research”, research which has at its base the problems and questions of teacher practice. If the work of the research circles is to influence the teaching of student teachers, it will probably be necessary for researchers and leaders of the research circles to participate to a greater extent in the basic education programme and for new contact points to be created between the university and the school. In this respect, I believe that the personal contact the research circle leader has with practising teachers can contribute to increased cooperation between the arenas.

The research circle as an arena

As noted earlier, the research circle is based on the meeting between practising teachers, student teachers, and researchers from universities.

In the circle the teachers will examine, describe and analyse problems and questions which they themselves have formulated about their practice. It is collective knowledge development which is taking place in the research circle. The participants are using the circle to acquire help with understanding and analysing a problem which can lead to development and change in their working practices.

The competence of the researcher is above all demonstrated in the way in which s/he conducts the research process in the circle. The research circle as arena is, therefore, built upon dialogue, communication and the expression of the different competences of the participants.
Different kinds of research circles

Research circles can be organised in different ways for different purposes. The Stockholm Research and Development Unit has experience of organising almost 80 research circles with professionals from different work places. They distinguish between circles for deepening knowledge, workplace-related research, and development work (Stockholm City, 2006). In the research circles organised by the Centre for Diversity in Education, the participant teachers follow a research process which takes for its starting point their own questions and issues.

We are working with four different variants of research circles.

1. **Research circles with a given theme** which the teacher can relate to. An example of a theme can be: cooperation with parents, second languages and intercultural learning.

2. **Research circles which takes a subject linked to didactics:** didactics for mathematics and languages and didactics for history are examples of this approach.

3. **Research circles which are based on questions** which a working team at a school has asked. Examples of such questions are: what is the meaning of concept development and how can we develop students’ understanding of concepts?

4. **Research circles which target certain categories of professionals and key groups.** Here we have, for instance, circles for school leaders.

In research circles focusing on a certain theme, teachers from different schools are applying not only in order to acquire more knowledge about a phenomenon, but also to undertake empirical investigations in relation to the given theme. The same is true for research circles which are more related to school subjects and didactics. In research circles which are based on the interests of a working team at a school/preschool, the teachers’ own experiences of working together in practice and in a certain school context is focused upon. More extensive discussions are needed for them to organise themselves around a common problem area. In order to develop the work in the school, heads and other school leaders are key personnel.
Not only do they need to understand the work of the research circles, but they also have the opportunity to research their own problems and questions through participating in a research circle. We have, therefore, introduced research circles aimed at these key persons. It is important to point out that the research circles which the Centre for Diversity in Education has started have a multicultural perspective. RMS works with all aspects of integration and multiculturalism, ethnic relations, gender, socio-economic background, sexual preferences, functional disorder, etc. The overarching goal is “a school of equal value for all”.
Research circles and school development

In this chapter I will discuss some of the issues which demand further consideration and for which there are no easy solutions. There are two questions especially which I focus on: is the research undertaken in the research circle ‘research’, and is the research circle itself leading to school development?

Research and research related practice
For the researcher working in the research circle, his/her absolute control over the process of knowledge no longer applies. With their different competences the researcher and the teacher cooperate closely to generate knowledge. The researcher, therefore, has to give up the monopoly on the formulation of research questions. Rather the researcher must start from the teachers and their experiences. Participatory research is facing criticism, questioning whether such a starting-point is fruitful.

An important question in this connection is whether the teacher who studies his/her own practice in a research circle is able to question his/her own practical professional theory or understanding of the education processes (Huberman, 1996).

From another critical perspective the researcher has pointed out that the teacher does not have the knowledge or the competence which is required for undertaking research in a relevant way. In the critics’ opinion, participatory research which has been undertaken has not met the expectations associated with good research. The view of the teacher as researcher has also met with criticism, since it is felt that it is not their professional role; teachers should be developing their own profession and teaching rather than undertaking research (Ziechner and Noffke, 2001).

An interesting question is, therefore, whether what the researcher and the teacher do in the research circle should be called ‘research’. Holmstrand and Härnsten (2003) hesitate about this definition because it is rare that the research circle is undertaking wider and more systematic study.

“We argue, therefore, that the work in the research circle is best viewed as similar to research and that it has many characteristics which research can and should have” (p. 158).
The authors, however, make a number of reservations by adding that research circles can be used for initiating research projects, that proper research within or in relation to the circle can be undertaken, and that the work of the research circle has an important element which is similar to the research process.

From my point of view the most important thing is not whether or not we call it research. I adopt a rather pragmatic attitude towards the research circle. I want the research circle to contribute to the knowledge and competence development of all participants, both members of the circle and its leaders, and I believe that the circle has the potential to be a tool for change and development. In my opinion, it is reasonable to call the work of a research circle a collective production of knowledge through a research process.

A concept which is often used in the university sector is research-related practice. The concept is often used for describing and analysing how research is read and used by professionals. You can say that the discussion has as its starting point that research is neither read nor used by professionals to any great extent. This formulation of the problem has the university at its base; it is the results of the researchers which will be implemented. It is, in my opinion, an unfruitful top-down model which has been shown to be unsuccessful for many reasons which I will not discuss here. The research circle has its starting point in another premise.

Research-related practice is a meeting; a meeting between researchers and professionals and a meeting between research and an interest in knowledge. For the participants who follow the research process outlined above, research which is carried out in the area becomes interesting, because it can help the teacher to understand better his/her area of knowledge.

Does the work of the research circle lead to school development?  
The answer to the question of whether the research circle leads to school development depends on how we define and understand the concept of school development. It seems reasonable to distinguish between development on the individual, working team, and organisational levels.

On the individual level it is concerned with change and the development of the knowledge and competences of the individual, and, through this, with change and development of the teacher’s teaching practices (or the equivalent for preschool teachers). We know that the participants, through their participation in the research circle, are changing their own teaching practices and that they see great potential in the research circle for school development (Holmström, 2008). In this way, the participants, of course, contribute to school development.
If we discuss school development from the perspective of the working team in the school and the pre-school, I believe that we already can see a change in working practices. This is, of course, particularly evident in the research circles which are focusing directly on the working teams. The reason for focusing on a working team at the school or pre-school is simply that the working team is a key group for initiating change and development. The planning, implementation and evaluation of teaching is often undertaken within the working team.

The practice is most common in the pre-school and in the early years of the compulsory school, but also teachers in the upper years of the compulsory school and in the upper secondary school are organised in working teams. There is in this practice considerable potential for further development. If a school or a pre-school is viewed as an organisation, then I believe that research circles have the potential to make the school more of a learning institution, in that changes in the organisation can to a large extent be based on the knowledge gained from research and tested experience. We need, however, research which can illustrate this.
Guidelines and preconditions

A precondition for the success of research circles is that there are clear organisational guidelines. This means that the leader and the members of the circle are making a symbolic contract for what happens in the circle. There is also a need for a contract between the employers (heads for the teachers, heads of units or similar for the leader of the circle) which regulates the participants’ time and work in the circle. It is important that these preconditions are clear from the beginning so that the members know which are valid. Some of the most important organisational guidelines are described below.

Numbers of participants

A research circle should consist of 5-6 participants and an experienced researcher as circle leader. This offers sufficient ‘space’ for all participants to have their voice heard in the discussions and for them to have the opportunity occasionally to present their own material to the others in the circle.

Time

Experiences gained from research circles show that continuity and the adoption of a long perspective are important factors for the production of knowledge. Certain time frames have, therefore, been established: the lifetime of the research circle is 1.5 years and two hour meetings are held every third week. In addition, participants must have designated time allocated between the meetings. In our research circles we have arranged for teachers to have two hours a week.

Personal research

A research circle is based on the professionals’ identification of a problem and its associated questions about which they wish to have more knowledge. Unlike a study circle, the research circle demands that the participants carry out small-scale empirical investigations. They have the
possibility of testing suitable methods for addressing the issues they have identified. One reason for this approach is that it offers teachers experience in documenting and analysing pedagogical events. This is a concrete example of how teachers, together with researchers, can analyse and reflect on practice.

Another purpose is that the results of the empirical investigation can be disseminated to others, such as teachers and heads, in the participant’s own school and also to the municipality as a whole. The investigations are disseminated as a ‘product’.

Outcomes
Research on research circles has pointed to the process in research circles as being of interest to researchers (see e.g. Holmsten and Härnsten, 2003). Researchers have, not least, been interested in their own role in the research circles. On the other hand, a conclusion could be drawn that the dissemination of results from the circle is poor and that the teachers’ own knowledge production has not been disseminated to any significant degree to other arenas.

Consequently we want the circle to result in a product, the nature of which the participants themselves decide upon. It can be a report, a book, an exhibition, a film. The product is common and each participant contributes with his/her input. We consider the product to be very important for the presentation and dissemination of the results from the work of the research circles. It is very important to identify the target group for the product. The target group is often teachers, heads, parents or students.

A collective production of knowledge
Teachers can join the research circle in order to undertake an individual project, such as the preparation of a PhD paper. It is quite possible to have such an entry point to the circle, but all participants need to be aware that in the circle a collective production of knowledge will result. The participants will demonstrate empirical evidence for each other in order to help each other interpret, understand, and explain the evidence.

The tasks of the circle leader
The most important task of the research circle leader is to lead the participants in the process of research – from the problem formulation phase to analysis and discussion. It is, therefore, neces-
sary that the leader is suitably experienced and qualified in research methods. In the circle there will be lectures and seminars with researchers and other experts who can provide additional inspiration and knowledge about specific issues.

Resources
Participation in a research circle cannot be seen as an ideal in itself for interested and dedicated persons. Rather, it is a way of organising teachers’ and other professionals’ acquisition of knowledge and competence in order to develop work of the whole school.

This means that school leaders and heads must dedicate resources for participating teachers so that they can fulfil their role in the circle in as an effective way as possible. In the circle organised by the Centre for Diversity in Education the following resources are allocated:

- Teachers have two hours a week to undertake work related to the research circle.
- The circle leader is allocated five hours for each meeting in order to prepare, implement and evaluate the work of the circle. If participants meet six times each a term the leader requires 30 hours per term for leadership of the research circle.

It will have been noted that no additional resources are allocated for the completion of the final product. If, for instance, the participants decide to write a report the leader of the circle will become the editor with responsibility for publishing and disseminating the report.

This requires the circle leader (and the participants) to invest much time in order to achieve a good final product. Extra resources should be put aside to make this possible. The estimated time for the circle leader to edit a report can be 25-30 hours.

How do you start a research circle?
The initiative for starting a research circle in a municipality can be taken by teachers, researchers, heads and decision-makers at all levels. The two main stakeholders are the school and the university. There must be professionals in these arenas who view the establishment of research circles as important for the reasons noted above. In my experience it is the researchers who have taken the initiative in most cases by visiting schools and school leaders whom they knew
to be interested. The researcher has then informed the teachers and the school leader about the purpose, preconditions and the guidelines of the initiative and invited the teachers to join the circle. It is, of course, important that teachers join out of their own interest and not because they are told to do it.

Let us assume that a contact has been made. Researchers and teachers in a working team have agreed that they wish to start a research circle at the school. The following actions should then be taken:

» Agree on the framework (it is suggested that the model outlined above could be adopted).
» Teachers come to an agreement with the head or school leader about the necessary conditions for their participation. Will they use the time allocated for their competence development or are there other resources available?
» The researcher does the same with his/her employer.
» If there are no extra resources, I suggest that the university pays the cost of the researcher and the school pays for the teacher. Common expenses will, for instance, be travel, books and other publications, and the final product. If the final product is a report then the cost will be a little more. In this case, the university and the school have to make an agreement.
» Decide on a location for the circle. If it is most suitable to be at the school, then a room should be booked.

The first meetings
In the thematic- and didactic- focused research circles, the teachers often do not know each other. They come from different places and different sub-sectors of the education system. What they have in common is their interest in the subject or the theme. It is important that in these circumstances there is an open and supportive atmosphere. Let the circle participants get to know each other by allowing them to talk about their interest in the theme and the expectations they have of their participation in the research circle.

Research circles with participants from a working team at a school or a pre-school do not have the same problem. The participants already know each other and they often want to start
immediately. In such cases, it can be appropriate to try to slow the participants down by promoting a discussion of their expectations and by allocating roles among the participating teachers and the leader of the circle.

Teachers who participate in research circles often have a clear opinion about the nature of research and of the work of the researchers. It is, therefore, important to have an open discussion about the objectives of the research circle and of the role and function of the circle leader. Experience has shown that there are teachers who expect to learn (from the leader of the circle) how to undertake research and they adopt, therefore, too passive an approach. It is necessary at the start to clarify the expectations both the participant and the leader of the circle might have about the research circle. It is then the task of the circle leader to provide the participants with the understanding that the research circle is based on the participants’ own activities and that it is not the circle leader who will do the work. There is sometimes an exaggerated respect for research which needs to be discussed and questioned.

There are mental barriers which constrain the participation of all members. I normally talk about a research circle as a place for the collective production of knowledge. I see this as an opportunity for teachers and leaders of the circles to reflect on, discuss and analyse the work of the teacher in a wide sense. It is in working together that we produce the knowledge about the work of the teachers with the purpose of changing and developing pedagogical practice and research. It is necessary to return to this purpose many times in the research circle. It is important that all the participants are aware of the framework which has been established for the research circle. A symbolic contract should be made so that there are no misunderstandings arising from a lack of knowledge about the preconditions for the participation. Resources, time for meetings etc. (see above for a description of these guidelines) should be laid down and agreed as soon as possible, providing the necessary stability for the work of the group. The participants should also know that their work in the research circle will result in a product, but the form this takes will be decided upon collaboratively.
The research process

It is necessary now to explain and discuss what the research process is. To support him/her, the circle leader has a considerable body of literature and different methodologies which describe the research processes in the social sciences. It is, however, entirely possible to start from a conceptual summary of the research process. I will now adopt such an intellectual exercise in order to describe a possible research process under the following headings: the phase of the problem formulation, our prior knowledge, the investigation methodology, analytic concepts for interpretation, results and conclusions for school development.

The problem formulation phase
An underlying principle of the research circle is that priority is given to practising teachers to formulate the problems. It is they who will formulate the problems and questions which will be researched and about which knowledge will be sought. It is widely acknowledged that the formulation of a problem to be researched is not easy. Even if we know what the problem or the area of interest is, it will take time to define exactly what the investigation will try to answer. Patel and Davidsson (2006) describe the phase of problem formulation as a funnel. The broad opening is that area which the teacher is interested in examining. In order to make an area suitable for investigation, it has to have its limits. This leads to the narrower opening at the other end of the funnel. It is a process which will lead to defining a purpose and to raising questions/hypotheses, so that the scope of the investigation becomes more precise.

What do we already know?
The research circle can be seen as a meeting point for the production of knowledge. It does not need to be new knowledge, but it is not only reproducing and reflecting. The production of knowledge seizes instead upon that what we know, that which is known, and comes up against what we do not know, what is unknown to us. In such a meeting between the known and unknown we produce knowledge by using the known. Expressed in another way, the investigations which the participants undertake, should, if possible, build on their prior knowledge.

The question about what we already know is often addressed by noting that we in the circle are reading literature and research about the issue. This, however, is not the only source of know-
ledge. It is also important to acknowledge the individual experiences of the circle participants in this process, partly in order to adopt a critical approach to an analysis of individual experiences so that the investigation is not undertaken simply to confirm what the individual already “knows”, but also to use “a bank of experiences” in the problem formulation phase.

How will the investigation be undertaken?
The two phases described above deal with the ‘what?’ questions concerning content and the formulation of problems and questions which it would be possible to examine. When we have decided what we will investigate, we can start the discussion about how this will be done. Again, there is much literature on research methods which the circle leader can use, but the teachers are not participating in a course about research didactics. In my experience, it is best to start from the teachers’ own experiences of the documentation. It is important to use the collective experience that teachers have. The task of the circle leader is then to conduct the discussion on the connection between the what and the how questions. The question which the circle leader should ask is: which is the best way (method) of looking for the answer to the question?

Analytical concepts for interpretation
As stressed earlier, the research circle is an arena for the production of collective knowledge. This means, among other things, that the participants’ investigations will be offered for discussion and scrutiny. The teachers help each other to interpret, understand and explain the “raw empirical data” of the investigations. The best discussions will result from teachers giving an interview, showing a film clip or presenting a report on an extract from a log book. By introducing analytical (theoretical) concepts for the interpretation of documentation we can create a necessary distance for the empirical evidence which is presented at the same time as the concept to help us to understand pedagogical occurrences in a new way. Often these concepts are already formulated by the teachers and the circle leader (for instance, history consciousness, intercultural education) especially in those research circles which are based on a theme, but then new discussions are needed about the meaning of the concepts and how they can be used to interpret and understand empirical evidence.
Results and outcomes for school development

A basic question in the research process concerns the nature of the result and the way in which it will be reported. The simplest and perhaps the most effective way are for the teachers to answer the questions which were posed in the problem formulation phase. If teachers report their findings for other teachers they have to be as concrete as possible in reporting results. They should identify the two or three most important results and use these as the starting point in reporting their conclusions.

The use of ‘conclusions’ in this context refer to those relating to the teacher’s own pedagogical practice and the work of the school/preschool. In reporting the ‘product’ of the research circle, the link between the productions of knowledge and practice becomes evident. Of course, changing teachers and developing their practice and their activities all contribute to school development. In other words, the teacher should be able to discuss the importance of their results to the development of and change in their own teaching and/or to the work of the school and preschool.

I am conscious that the above description of the research process is greatly simplified; on the other hand, this is simply the point. The research process is built on a number of principals and is seen here as a tool for the production of knowledge. In order to be such a tool, it has to be understood and taken on board by the participants. For example, it makes it possible for teachers to consider whether the research circle can be a tool for teaching or for researchers consider the potential of the research circle to teacher education.
A concrete example

Let me present a concrete example of the first part of the research process based on a research circle of a working team at a compulsory school. A head of a Malmö school had heard about the research circles and wanted to start one at the school. I then met with the senior management of the school to discuss aims, guidelines and preconditions. I attended a meeting with all the teachers in the school and informed them about the aims of the circle. A working team then announced their interest in participating. We proceeded from the contract described earlier and quickly agreed on guidelines and preconditions for participation in the research circle. The participants and I had the support of the school management from the outset.

The working team, which was responsible for students in years 4-6, told me that their students were “weak” in language and their general educational level. The students did not understand basic concepts encountered in school books and the teachers were working hard to increase the students’ language levels, but felt that they were unsuccessful and constantly had to start from the beginning. In the teachers’ opinion, the problems arose to a great extent the difficult social situation in which many of the students lived. Many were children of refugees and had only recently come to live in Sweden. During the problem formulation phase the focus gradually moved from the problems of the children to those intrinsic to their education. If the children have difficulties to understand and use concepts, then it is a pedagogical issue. What can one as a teacher do to help the students? From this consideration we formulated an overarching research question: what support do the students need in order to understand and use concepts?

The next step was to identify what we already knew. There are many researchers and theoreticians who have been interested in children’s concept building and didactics. The teachers had a good knowledge of the children’s learning from a socio-cultural aspect through having attended, among other things, in-service training with Leif Strandberg. His book, “Vygotskij in practice” (Vygotskij i praktiken) (2006), offers a deep insight into the thinking of Vygotskij and also offers sound advice.

However, we needed a model for concept-building which can form the basis of teachers’ pedagogical practice. Arevik and Hartzell (2007), in their book “To make thinking visible – concept based education” (Att göra tänkandet synligt – en bok om begreppsbaserad undervisning), de-
veloped a model for concept-building which met our need for a theoretical base and for being capable of practical application. The teachers in the working team used this model as a starting point for their thematic and subject teaching.

The concepts which formed the focus of the teaching were, among others, ‘power’ and ‘belief’, concepts with a generally high level of abstraction.

We began now to approach the how-question. After discussion, we decided that video recording the lessons in which the teachers use the model could offer us a basis for understanding the nature of the support the students would need for learning the concepts. A librarian filmed different lessons and we watched together selected sequences from the videos. Another question which arose was how we could know that the students understood and could use the concepts. To help us, we had the students’ own diaries which could reflect their level of understanding of the concepts. We also decided to interview a number of selected students in order to achieve a better basis for talking about conceptual understanding.

At the time of writing, this is where we stand in the research process. The research circle has been in operation for only six months, but already the teachers indicate that the students are using the concepts in a new and more varied way. The teachers themselves have also gained a greater understanding of their own practice and how this can develop. In this type of research circle aiming directly at a working team, it is obvious that there are two parallel aims and processes. The teachers are, of course, directing their energies on the development of their teaching in order to be as effective as possible. They are keen to evaluate the teaching and discuss the organisation and implementation of the lessons. My task has, therefore, been to relate what they are doing to the research question. Even what the teachers experience as a bad lesson can be used as a basis for a discussion of what support the students need in order to understand and use concepts.
Frequently Asked Questions

WHEN CAN MEETINGS BE HELD?
It is most important that all members of the research circle have the possibility to come to the meetings. It is, therefore, common that the participants meet in the late afternoon or in the evening. Make an agreement where no-one is excluded.

WHERE SHOULD MEETINGS BE HELD?
In the research circles RMS has organised, we have been able to use the RMS premises. Many of the research circles have located their meetings in the participating schools. Occasionally, meetings have taken place in the university.

IS IT REALLY ‘RESEARCH’ WHICH THE CIRCLES ARE DEALING WITH?
If, by research, we mean scientific investigation and analysis carried out by researchers, then it is not research which being undertaken. If, on the other hand, we stress concepts such as the production of knowledge, the meeting between tested and scientific experience and the research process, it is relevant to speak about a research circle. It must be remembered that a report from the research circle is not, nor should it be, a scientific report, meeting the demands made on the research community. It is the teachers’ own investigations which are presented for other teachers, students, heads or parents. Holmstrand and Härnsten (2003) argue that what is taking place in the research circles is research-like.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A RESEARCH CIRCLE AND A STUDY CIRCLE?
As noted earlier, it is the tradition of ‘folk’ education in the study circle which has formed the foundation for the development of the research circles. A basic difference is that we in the research circle undertake investigations which have as the starting point the participants’ own problem and question formulation. It is the research process which drives the work of the research circle. In the study circle a phenomenon is studied, for example, literature, and discussed in order to improve knowledge.
DOES THE LEADER OF THE RESEARCH CIRCLE HAVE TO BE EDUCATED IN THE PROCESS OF RESEARCH?
This question is linked to the characteristics of the research circle as an arena. We look upon it as a meeting between researchers and professionals, where both are using their specific knowledge, competences and experiences in a process of research. The meeting in itself is valuable, but the research circle is driven through the research process, so the leader of the circle does need to be experienced in research in order lead the work.

WILL EVERYONE READ THE SAME LITERATURE?
No, but it is good if some books or articles are common. It can be literature on research methodology or literature with content relevant to all the participants in the circle. If we start from the literature which all in the group have read, there is greater potential for deeper discussions. Moreover, the participants can study their subject areas by reading books or articles in which they have a specific interest.

WHY DO THE PARTICIPANTS NOT RECEIVE ANY UNIVERSITY CREDITS?
We have decided that study undertaken in the research circles will not be given credit for university studies. This decision is not based on any firm principle to prevent the members from receiving university credits for their participation. The advantages of remaining outside the university course system, however, outweigh those of being within it. Firstly, the participants do not need to feel stress because they have to write an exam or to read prescribed literature. Secondly, university credits focus on the individual, while the research circle is built on the collective knowledge building. Thirdly, a course plan has to be written, which has to consist of a body of literature which has to be read, the form of examination has to be described etc.. A university course makes the process of knowledge acquisition more formal in a way which I cannot see promoting knowledge building conforming to the principles of the research circle.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE RESEARCH CIRCLE AND THE EXAM WORK AT THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION?
This is a question which teachers and researchers at the teacher education institution often ask. Let us first take what is common between the two. Students at universities are following an examination course in which they are expected to follow a research process similar to that
described above. Through the course the students will gain an insight into research and the building of knowledge linked and relevant to the student’s study area; s/he will also use scientific methods for study and practice their critical ability. In this respect, there are significant similarities between the students’ course and the teachers’ work and knowledge building in the research circle. This is, in my opinion, a great advantage.

Those who have followed examination courses will recognise these similarities for themselves and we can more easily demystify what knowledge production means. There are also, however, some differences which it is important to note. When students follow a course, what they write about often has little relevance to their future work as teachers. In the research circle, however, it is the teachers’ experiences, work, teaching or understanding of the pedagogical problems which provide the focus. It is the problems and questions of pedagogical practice which provide the starting point for the work of the circle. Another difference is that the student will be examined individually according to predetermined criteria, which is not required of the teacher in the research circle. (See the discussion above on university credits).

**CAN STUDENTS JOIN THE RESEARCH CIRCLE?**

Of course. It is in fact one of the major opportunities for development in the research circle. By having teacher education students participate (for instance, through preparing an examination about the research circles or on the area of interest which the circle is concerned with) we can create a more effective link between the study of education and the profession of teaching. There are advantages in having research circles as a vehicle for professional development with mixed groups of student teachers and teachers.

**SHOULD HEAD TEACHERS AND TEACHERS PARTICIPATE IN THE SAME RESEARCH CIRCLE?**

This has not yet been tried. In the circles we have organised, the head teachers have their own circles in order to create more knowledge about the issues and questions which are specific to them. I am, however, not against the involvement of letting head teachers in the same circle as teachers. We need more experience and knowledge about how this will function before we can draw any conclusions.
How will we develop the research circle?

In this section, I note some possibilities for the development of the research circle.

**LET STUDENT TEACHERS TAKE PART IN A WIDER EXTENSION**
So far the research circles have mostly been geared to practising teachers or other sector professionals. We should argue that the research circles provide an important vehicle for the delivery of professional development opportunities, for example, all aspects of teacher education, allowing teachers and student teachers to learn about the job and the profession.

**USE THE RESEARCH CIRCLE IN TEACHER EDUCATION**
The research circle is an appropriate vehicle for professional training. It is a method for the collective production of knowledge which is similar to other methods, such as problem-based learning (PBL), but which has a clearer research focus. PBL often starts from a predetermined case or illustration, while problem formulation in the research circle should start rather from the practical experience of the students gained in schools during their course. It gives a more obvious focus to the problems and questions and one which is based in reality.

**WE NEED MORE RESEARCH ON AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE RESEARCH CIRCLE**
One way of developing and bringing change to the research circle is to allow researchers to study critically the three arenas which are involved: the university, the research circle, and school/preschool. We need more knowledge about the research circle and whether it can mediate between the university and school and about the problems teachers and the circle leader are facing when they want to work for change in and the development of the respective arenas.

We also need to seek knowledge about the research circle from the circle leaders and from the participating teachers themselves. The circles need to be documented and evaluated. A proposed method for the gathering of documentation and for undertaking an evaluation can be found at annexes 2 and 3.
**MORE EXPERIENCE OF PRESENTING AND DISSEMINATING THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH CIRCLE**

The research circle will lead to a product. It can be a report, an exhibition, a film, a workshop or another appropriate product which the participants and the circle leader have agreed on. We do not yet know much about the detailed nature of the products look like or about how they will be received at the university or the school/pre-school. It is, therefore, necessary to undertake a follow-up and evaluation of the research circles which extend beyond the lifetime of the circle. We want to know if the product is used by teachers at the university and the school/pre-school, in which way it is used, and which factors facilitate and which constrain dissemination.

**MORE RESEARCH CIRCLES WHICH ARE DIRECTED AT WORKING TEAMS**

Most research circles which we have established are based on thematic content or on issues of didactics. There are also research circles directed at specific groups (heads, pre-school teachers). Only a few of the circles have a working team in a school/pre-school as their starting-point. Research circles for working teams arise from a problem which teachers encounter in their daily work. Often teachers start with a problem they have in common. Discussions will deal with common experiences to a greater extent than in other research circles. The knowledge and competences which the teachers acquire can then be used for change and development of their work in a more direct way.

**CIRCLE LEADERS NEED OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR COMPETENCE**

It is not easy to be a leader of the research circle, not least because it demands good knowledge, social and scientific competence, and flexibility. It is easy for the circle leader to feel lonely in his/her role and function. It is, therefore, important that the circle leaders meet to discuss their roles in a research circle. The meetings of the circle leaders can be organised as seminars, for example, once every term, when the participants can inspire each other and share each other’s experiences and knowledge.
Bibliography


Documentation in the research circles

Documentation can be used to provide an empirical base for evaluation and a deeper knowledge about the content and form of the research circles.

1. Minutes are taken to report on all meetings. These can be written by the participants and the circle leader. The minutes deal mostly dealt with the content of the meetings.
2. Support materials which are distributed for the discussions are saved.
3. The circle leader writes a formal log book which deals with:
   » Guidelines and preconditions for the research circle (for example, time and resources)
   » The support which the circle participants have required in order to undertake their projects
   » Problems encountered (what has been problematic?)
   » Inputs in the form of lectures, literature etc.
   » The participants’ experiences of the circle
4. The product which results from the research circle.
Evaluation of the research circles

WHAT DO WE WANT TO KNOW?
Are the organisational guidelines adhered to?
What support do the participants of the circle need?
Do the research circles contribute to professional development and the development of the whole school?

HOW WILL WE KNOW THIS?
The circle leaders are documenting the process (see separate paper).
The circle participants complete an evaluation after the end of the circle’s lifespan or at another time.

WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD WE ASK THE CIRCLE PARTICIPANTS IN AN EVALUATION?
Guidelines and organisational support:
In your experience, has there been sufficient time for the work in the research circle?
Have the organisational preconditions been satisfied?
What more do you think is needed in the form of time and organisational support?

PEDAGOGICAL SUPPORT:
What support and help have you received from the circle leader?
What support would you liked to have had from the leader of the circle?
What support and help have you received from your colleagues in the circle?
How active have you yourself been in supporting others in the circle?

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:
In which ways do you think that your work in the research circle has contributed to your professional development?
Has your participation in the research circle contributed to the development of your school/preschool? If so, in what way?

OTHERS:
Annex 3

Format for reporting in the circle

Font
Text is written in Times New Roman 12

Headings
Title: Times New Roman 16 bold text
First subheading: Times New Roman 14 normal
Second subheading: Times New Roman 12 Italic

Paragraph Break
Paragraphs separated by empty row

Quotation
If surrounded by text, the quotation is written with an inset of 1 cm in Times New Roman 11:

The overarching purpose of the supervision has been described in the following way:

The overarching purpose of the supervision is to contribute to the professional growth and development, which is shown in actual changes to the pedagogy used work and which, in the long run, will be of use to the students (Lendahls Rosendahl & Rönnerman 2002, p 54)

I believe that most people can agree with this description. Problems arise, however, when we wish to define and analyse what professional growth and development means for the educationalists and who it is who has the power to define the concept of professional growth and development.
Quotations are written with quotation marks if the quotation consists of only one sentence. Always write the page number.

REFERENCES
In running text references within a sentence are written as follows:

While childrens’ visual cultures among others are based on the childhood sociology (James & Prout, 1990) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992), friendship culture research leads to micro sociology and ethnographic-oriented analysis of conversation (Corsaro 1997; Goodwin 1990).

You can also write the reference at the end of the section:

Studies of children’s friendship cultures show that children in their daily language activities, form social identities, norms and common experiences at the same time as they refine and develop linguistic and bodily expressions (Evaldsson, 2004).

The literature referred to will be included in the bibliography at the end of your article. (I have not written the first name, but this can be included to show the gender of the author).

BOOKS

ARTICLES INCLUDED IN BOOKS:
ARTICLE IN A PERIODICAL PUBLICATION:
Sven Persson

is doctor and professor of pedagogy at the School of Teacher Education, Malmö University College, and research leader at the Centre for Diversity in Education (RMS) in Malmö. Sven Persson has a particular interest in a participatory research paradigm and has lead supervision projects and research circles with teachers using this approach. He also supervises doctoral candidates for the doctorate with this approach.

Research circles – a guide

This is a methodology guidebook which offers concrete and practical guidance to those who wish to start, implement and evaluate a research circle. It also provides a brief background about how the research circle as a methodology has developed and its field of application.

Important changes in society demand new knowledge and competences among teachers and other personnel in schools and pre-schools. Research and research related activities are increasingly common and more discussed in daily school life than previously.

In contrast to the occasional research inputs into professional development, the research circle provides time, continuity, meetings and dialogue, and it has recently become a popular and reliable method for the development of the school and the profession.

The methodology book addresses researchers from universities, practising teachers, and other professionals who want to develop new knowledge. It is the first in a series of publications published by the Centre for Diversity in Education, Research and Development.