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PRACTICE-ORIENTED RESEARCH IN SERVICE OF DESIGNING INTERVENTIONS

ABSTRACT

The strength of the practice-oriented research strategy is to develop knowledge about the improvement of practices. Practice oriented research is research in which the research goal is coming from the professional practice and in which the knowledge created in the research contributes directly to this professional practice. The problem does not originate in theory, and the knowledge created in the research is not valued because it contributes to theory. It is not knowledge-for-its-own-sake, but the knowledge is valued because it contributes to the improvement of the practice which is considered (by ministers and lay people) to be a problem. Practice-orientated research is especially relevant to congregational studies because the congregational ministry is conducted within a specific context that is challenging it to be relevant. The major steps or questions in developing a research design of practice oriented research is: what is the problem you are going to study? Why is it interesting to get this new knowledge and for whom is it interesting? How are you going to reach your research objective? How much do you want to know? And what are the conceptual instruments which you are going to use in your research? In following these steps the specific research orientation of practice oriented research is introduced.

1. INTRODUCTION

The strength of the practice-oriented research strategy is to develop knowledge about the improvement of practices. In the article 'Utility of practical theology', we coined this type of knowledge as knowledge about the design of interventions. It is 'how to' knowledge about actions or interventions. Another name for this type of research is 'action research'. We do not use this name. Why? Action research has already been criticized from the beginning of the development of this research strategy

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(Hodgkinson 1957) because of its weakness in developing knowledge about the improvement of practice. We will not discuss whether this is true of all scholars working under this name. Under the name of 'practice-oriented research' (Verschuren 2009) or 'design research' (McKenney & Reeves 2011), scholars are combining a strong commitment to improvement of practice with the need to develop knowledge about this improvement. There is a coherent and deliberate combination of what Andriessen (2007) calls the knowledge stream and the practice stream. We will introduce Andriessen's model later in this article. As a result of this knowledge development goal, there is a strong commitment for thorough methodological rules and procedures. For this introduction, it suffices to state that practice-oriented or design research as a research strategy is familiar to, but not the same as action research.

In practice-oriented research, the research goal originates from the professional practice, and the knowledge created in the research contributes directly to this professional practice (Andriessen 2014:14). The problem does not stem from theory, and the knowledge created in the research is not valued, because it contributes to theory. It is not knowledge-for-its-own-sake, but the knowledge is valued, because it contributes to the improvement of the practice that is considered (by ministers and lay people) to be a problem. Practice-oriented research is especially relevant to congregational studies. The congregational ministry is conducted within a specific context that is challenging it to be relevant (see Ammerman 2009:576; Hendriks 2004:70-72). Ministerial practices that were effective in one situation or era may not be effective in another context or within the context of a different generation. The following typical questions illustrate this point. Why is there a decline in attendance of the worship service or why is the participation of young people declining in the congregation? Numerous questions could and should be asked continuously about the relevance of the congregational ministry. The starting point is not theoretical, but rather practice oriented, and illustrates the need for n-type research.

We present the major steps in developing a research design of practice-oriented research. We restrict ourselves to the conceptual research design and skip the so-called technical design of the research (Verschuren & Doorewaard 1999): "The conceptual design determines *what, why and how much* we are going to study" (Verschuren & Doorewaard 1999:16). The main function of the conceptual design is a steering function: What problem shall we study? Why is it interesting to obtain this new knowledge, and for whom is it interesting? How shall we reach our research objective? How much do we want to know? What conceptual instruments shall we use in our research? We restrict ourselves to the conceptual research design rather than to the technical

research design, because the former contains the major differences between a theory-oriented research and a practice-oriented research. In addition, the major research decisions are made in the conceptual design, so that any researcher can create a technical research design based on this conceptual design.

In following these steps, the reader will be introduced in the specific research orientation of practice-oriented research. Many steps will be unfamiliar to readers who are acquainted with mainline qualitative and/or quantitative research (see our article on survey research). By following the stepwise process of developing a research design, we believe that we make it easier for the reader to understand the specific character of practice-oriented research. At the same time, we map the road for researchers (students) in (practical) theology who want to develop a project plan into practice-oriented research. In this article, we use, as illustration, two researches in which the first author (Hermans) is involved.[1]

2. STEP 1: HOW ARE THE ROLES OF RESEARCHER, RESEARCHED AND PROBLEM OWNER DISTRIBUTED?

A problem owner is a person (for example, a minister), group of persons (for example, a policy body within congregations), or an organisation as the 'stakeholder' of an action problem. This stakeholder has an interest or concern in the problem. This problem owner often has the (final) responsibility for the action in question (for example, the leadership in a local congregation). A problem owner can easily be identified as s/he gives the commission for the research project and is the instance to which the researcher should report his/her findings. The problem may not be viewed as something negative, but as a positive challenge or as an area in need of

1 The first project is called '*Vertellen en delen wat van waarde is in onze school*' ('Telling and sharing what we value in our school'). This project started in 2009 and is funded by the Catholic School system in the Netherlands (VK0); the PhD researcher involved in this research is Dr. Hade Wouters. The project is supervised by Prof. Chris Hermans, Prof. Dr. Piet Verschuren and Dr. Theo van der Zee. The second PhD project is titled '*Unsere Geschichte als Kirche am Ort erzählen*' ('Telling the story of our local church'). This project started in 2012 and is financed by the diocese of Aachen. The researcher is Dr. Dieter Praas. The project supervisors are Prof.Dr. Chris Hermans and Dr. Michael Scherer-Rath.

growth.[2] The role of leadership in a congregation (as problem owner) is to identify the specific areas for growth.

Problem owners are not involved in main-line qualitative or quantitative research. Metaphorically perhaps, the 'research community as a whole' can be considered to be the 'problem owner' of a theoretical problem. For problem owners in a practice-oriented project, the quality or continuity of a specific pastoral service or the very existence of an organisation (a local congregation, for instance) is at stake. Problem owners can be part of the group that will be researched, but this is not necessary. In the project of the diocese Aachen, the staff of the diocese (responsible for pastoral development) and the vicar-general of the diocese are the problem owners. The diocese started with a project in which congregations merged together. The focus of the merger is mainly buildings, finance and staff (especially the scarce number of priests). The staff of the diocese wanted to know how the members of the newly constructed entity experienced their new situation. In what way do they speak about their 'local church' in terms of identification and connectedness to its practices.

The roles of researcher, researched and problem owner can be clearly separated or (more or less) connected (Verschuren 2012:95). The researcher can have no, or a very strong involvement in the change of the practice. The distribution of the roles in the research project relates to the focus of the research. In a *knowle*.g.-*generating type*, the focus of the research is the production of new knowledge and insight, which, as soon as it becomes available, will be applied to the problem in a specific situation. The research is mainly data driven and the roles of the researcher, the researched and the problem owner are clearly distinguished. The researcher needs to have a sound methodological knowledge in order to do this type of research. A second type is called the *expert model* (Verschuren 2012:94), in which the roles of the researcher, the researched and the problem owner are clearly distinguished. In this type of research, the researcher has the role of expert, for example someone with a great deal of knowledge on the subject related to the problem and problem solution. The researcher need not only have knowledge of the research methodology, but should also have practical knowledge and process knowledge as a change agent in organisations such as churches, congregations, liturgy, church planting, and so on. The roles of the researcher, the researched and the problem owner blur in the *problem-solving model* of practice-oriented research. The focus of the research is an attempt to come to a partial or complete solution of the problem in the specific situation. The knowledge produced

2 See the role of appreciative enquiry in congregational studies (Hendriks 2014; Branson 2004).

in this process can be transferred to a comparable situation, but this is an indirect goal. In this type of research, solutions and knowledge are the result of a co-construction between the researcher, the researched and the problem owner. This type of research is also called participatory research.

Some researchers might consider the involvement of a problem owner in a research project troublesome. We are of the opinion that it is a solution to many problems arising in practical theological research, where researchers want to bring change in a situation. One of the aspects of the problem owner's role is to guarantee that the project is collaborative, well connected to the interests and problems of the problem owner, and use oriented (McKenney & Reeves 2012:chapter 1). We all know of research by theological students and scholars (!) who truly intend to make a difference in the lives and practices of the people they study. At the end of the project, they are frustrated, because nothing truly changed. This happens despite their hard work and good intentions. We believe that this can happen when ownership is taken from the people who 'own' the action problem. If the researcher (but not the practitioners or the researched) has ownership, it is not surprising that an intervention did not make a big change in the life of people. Another example from congregational studies is the issue as to give a comprehensive description of the congregational situation. In fact, it is only a description of certain trends, and the ownership of the problem remains vague. If the leadership of a congregation is involved from the beginning of a practice-oriented research project, the process and outcome could be totally different.

3. STEP 2: WHAT IS THE ACTION PROBLEM?

Action problems express the discrepancy between the actual (A_component) and the desired (D_component) situation, where the actors (based on the existing knowledge) have *no knowledge* as to how to solve this discrepancy (Verschuren 2009:155; McKenney & Reeves 2012:85-108). An action problem can only emerge if there is an awareness that the actual situation is not what it should be. We observe the following: fewer young people below the age of 20 attend our church meetings; after the merger of congregations, there is a decline in vitality in terms of identification and commitment with the community, and a decline in membership of our congregation is due to the demographic shift in the population of the neighborhood, in which our congregation is located. The A_component of the action problem is a description of the actual situation. Leading questions are:

- What are the facts?
- Which part of the situation is most problematic for the problem owner(s)?
- How does the problem manifest itself?
- What is the extent of the problem that is reported?

A description in itself does not create an action problem. There needs to be an awareness that 'it should not be like this'. If not, there is no action problem and people and organisations simply continue to do what they are doing. The D_component is the prescriptive or normative dimension of the action problem. It does not refer to questions of true or not true, but of what is desirable in terms of what we should be able to do. The D_component is formulated in action terms. Leading questions are:

- What is our dream of the future of our congregation?
- What do we want to do (practise) in order to be able to shape this future?
- What would be the nature of this desired (future) practice?

According to Rahner, this discrepancy between the A_component and the D_component is the focus of practical theology: "Practical theology is that theological discipline which is concerned with the Church's self-actualisation here and now – both that which *is* and that which *ought to be*" (Rahner 1972:102). When congregations merge, they create an historical new shape, in which they want to actualize the essence of the Church. This new historical realization is not necessarily what the church of Christ is meant to be (in terms of its essence). By reflecting on the discrepancy between the actual practice and the desired practice, we are at the heart of what practical theology needs to take as its starting point of theological thinking. We highlight the dimension of action or practice: it needs to be concrete, observable, enacted by human beings or communities in time and space! Through these actions or practices, the Church of Christ must realize itself in time and space. If a congregation (or Church) wants to be missional, the leading question is: What is the desired practice reflecting the '*Missio Dei*' in time and space in South Africa?

A missional framework gives markers for the desired practices of congregational life (see Hendriks 2007; Niemandt 2012; Van Niekerk 2014). The actual practices need to be in line with the desired practices. Practice-oriented research will start from the perspective of the leadership. This is an inductive and contextual process. It is very important, from a congregational perspective, to take the context seriously. Congregations cannot be considered sanctuaries to escape from the reality of the context. This will challenge the missional orientation of a congregation.

In practice-oriented research, the action problem is not what the researcher defines, but it reflects the understanding of the problem owner. In theory-oriented research, we base our understanding of an action problem on literature. In a practice-oriented research, the description of the action problem is the result of a process between the researcher and the problem owner. Why? The action problem needs to reflect the ideas, concerns and beliefs of the problem owner and/or the researched. No change will occur if the problem owner does not want to develop in the direction of the desired situation. This is precisely the problem a researcher can experience if his/her project is not aligned to the awareness of the problem owner(s)'s action problem. However, at the same time, we must be aware of the fact that the understanding of the action problem by the problem owner can be less clear than one would like it to be (Verschuren 2009). Related to the A_component, there can be a (to a certain extent) biased, selective observation of the situation or action. Persons (ministers, lay community leaders) and communities do not know the facts or characteristics of their situation; are not open to what they observe, and are not willing to act differently, because they believe that it will not change their situation (Hermans 2012). With regard to the D_ component, the problem owner believes that it is quite obvious in what direction s/he wants to see change. The problem is often that the change is not formulated in terms of actions or practices, but rather globally and vaguely. Another problem is that the problem owner often disagrees about the desired outcome and, therefore, chooses to keep it global and vague. In such a situation, the researcher needs to facilitate the process of the problem owner in order to obtain a deeper and more precise formulation of the desired action (Schwarz *et al.* 2005). This is a good example of the fact that the researcher also has the role of a change agent who takes (co-) responsibility for the process of change.3

4. STEP 3: IS THE ACTION PROBLEM AN IMPROVEMENT OR DESIGN PROBLEM?

All practice-oriented research originates from an action problem with the goal to build knowledge about interventions that aims to improve this

3 According to Donald Schön (1983: 282), "A practitioner might break into the circle of self limiting reflection by attending to his role frame, his interpersonal theory in use, or the organizational learning system in which he functions. Whatever his starting point, however, he is unlikely to get very far unless he wants to extend and deepen his reflection in action, and unless others help him see what he has worked to avoid seeing.". Helping a practitioner to reflect on his/her situation is not simply a descriptive process, but already 'leading the horse to the water'.

problem. There are two different types of practice-oriented research. The focus of the research can be to build knowledge *about* or *through* an intervention (McKenney & Reeves 2012:7-30). Both types of research are related in their focus on interventions (for instance, practice orientation) and not on theory building (descriptive and explanatory). With the help of an intervention, the first type aims to improve a certain practice. In the second type, the design of the intervention itself is the goal of the research. Both types are distinct and connected. Research, which aims to improve a practice through an intervention, also needs to develop or design an intervention. But the focus is not on knowledge about the design, but on the desired improvement of the practice. In research focused on the design of interventions, we also need to implement the intervention design and test whether this design improves the actions of persons, communities, or organisations.

A project with a focus on improving the problem follows the intervention cycle (or the policy cycle as far as organisations are concerned). In Figure 1, we mention six steps of the intervention cycle, as reported by Verschuren (2009:159-163). It starts with an analysis of the problem in a specific context (time/place). Next, we endeavour to understand the causes of the problem and formulate the conditions for solving the problem. The solution is oriented on the desired, but it depends on the possibility to deal with the causes as to what degree the desired will be realised. We must realize that what appears from the outside to be a small improvement can be a major step in the eyes of the problem owner. Next, an intervention plan will be designed and implemented. The result of this intervention will be evaluated in order to understand if there is, in fact, an improvement. The research on the merger of congregations uses the intervention cycle. The improvement problem regards the quality of the narrative by members of the new entity. One of the qualities of this narrative is the degree in which it is shared by the members. The intervention aims to improve this quality, namely the degree in which this narrative is shared. For example, it introduces the participants to story-telling and to experience the power of stories in uniting difference and heterogeneity (Ricoeur 1992).

In the design cycle, the focus is on the design problem or construction problem. The design of the intervention, which is only one phase in the intervention cycle, consists of four phases in the design cycle (see Figure 1). The major aim is to develop knowledge about an intervention design which supports change towards the desired practice. This desired practice can be materialized in a product (liturgy, protocol of pastoral counselling, practice of social ministry, and so on), but the aim can also be to develop design principles that can be used to realize the desired practice. Design demands refer to the goals of the intervention, the demands related to the

users, and the demands related to the setting in which the intervention will be used. The demands are translated into structural specifications of the designed intervention. In the next stage, different prototypes are constructed based on the structural specifications. Verschuren (2009) and McKenney & Reeves (2012) stress the fact that phases 2 to 5 are iterative. In other words, in constructing a new prototype, we also reflect on both the design demands and the assumptions, and refine the structural specifications. Implementation and distribution happen in every phase of testing a prototype. In the evaluation, we reflect on the question as to how far the design goal has been reached in terms of either the product that has been developed, or the design principles.

Figure 1: Intervention cycle and design cycle (based on Verschuren 2009:159)

INTERVENTION cycle (improvement problems)	DESIGN cycle (construction problems)
1. Problem analysis	1. Goal
2. Diagnosis	2. Design demands/assumptions
3. Conditions for the solution	3. Structural specifications
4. Intervention plan	4. Prototype (alpha, beta, gamma)
5. Implementation	5. Implementation and distribution
6. Evaluation	6. Evaluation

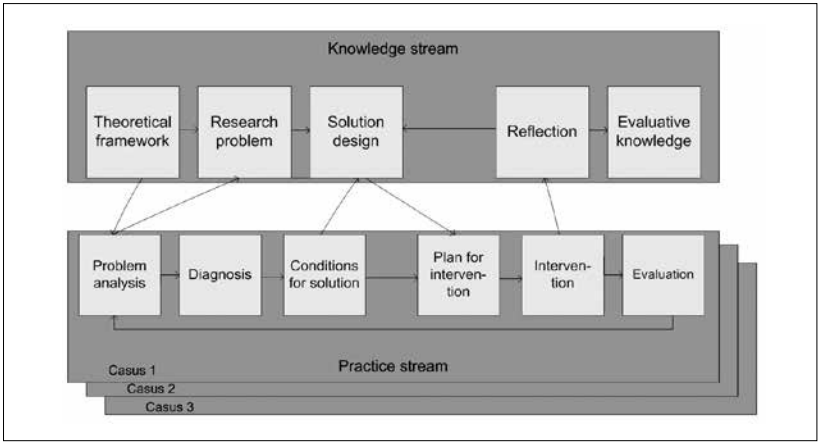
5. STEP 4: WHAT IS THE KNOWLEDGE PROBLEM CONNECTED TO THE ACTION PROBLEM?

Practice-oriented research is scientific research with the aim of building knowledge about practice and contributing to an improvement of practice. Its focus is not simply the improvement through intervention or the construction of interventions, but building a theoretical understanding of interventions. We introduced this dual focus in the introduction. The Dutch educationist Daan Andriessen (2007; 2012; Van Aken & Andriessen 2011) developed a model in which this dual focus is clearly structured (see Figure 2). This model consists of two streams that have their own logic, goals and demands. The practice stream consists of the intervention cycle or design cycle. The knowledge stream consists of the empirical cycle or research cycle.

The focus of the empirical cycle is to develop scientific knowledge on the intervention design or improvement problem. The research problem is a knowledge problem related to the practice problem. A knowledge problem is the discrepancy between existing knowledge (E) and new knowledge (N). E_knowledge is formulated based on the following: Find all the necessary available knowledge (literature, experts, policy research) to describe and understand the practice which you want to study! N_ knowledge is formulated on the basis of what we do not know with regard to an action problem or intervention design (What to decide? What to do?). The new knowledge is knowledge that helps practitioners (problem owner and/or researched) change the actual situation in the direction of the desired situation.

In Figure 2, the E_knowledge is formulated in the theoretical framework within the knowledge stream. The nature of the desired N_knowledge becomes evident in the research problem. The N_knowledge is also the focus of the research questions. Research questions need to state what the desired N_knowledge is that the research wants to develop. In the knowledge stream (for instance, empirical cycle), the research questions can be located following the research problem or at the beginning of the solution design (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Research methodology of a design-based research: Two streams (based on Andriessen 2007:94)



The two streams are different and connected. First, the difference (see Figure 3). The knowledge stream includes activities aimed at mobilizing existing, generic (= transferable) knowledge and developing new

generic knowledge. In order to develop theory on intervention designs, researchers use rich, detailed case studies and case-related reasoning. 'Cross-case' analysis, or the comparison between cases is an important method in creating generic knowledge. Where did a generic solution lead to the desired effect, where not or to a lesser degree? Why did it work and why not? What are the mechanisms within the intervention that can be transferred to other situations and contexts?

The practice stream includes activities focused on a concrete practice or case in which generic knowledge is used to solve the problem in a specific situation or to support the learning process of professionals in a specific case. Professionals and organisations are interested in this specific case, or this specific intervention design. What are the effects of this intervention or design in this specific context? The main task of the researcher in the practice stream is to advise, facilitate and support the change process. Depending on the model of the connection between the roles of the researcher, the researched and the problem owner (see above), the attitude of the researcher can be more involved and steering. In other words, the researcher as advisor takes (partly) responsibility for the change within a specific context or organisation.

Figure 3: Differences between the knowledge stream and the practice stream (based on Andriessen 2011:80)

	KNOWLEDGE STREAM	PRACTICE STREAM
Function	Mobilising and developing	Problem-solving and learning knowledge
Nature	In search of the general	Connected to the specific
Activities	Researching and analysing	Advising and intervening
Attitude	Objective and independent	Convincing and dependent
Goal	Advancing theory	Supporting practice

Both streams are connected in the sense that there is a mutual interdependence between both streams (indicated by arrows in Figure 2). Theoretical concepts are used as a lens to understand what is happening in a concrete situation. This does not mean that chronologically the researcher first constructs a theoretical frame before making a problem analysis. In the case of the research on mergers of congregation, the diocese of Aachen (Germany) approached the University of Nijmegen with a global idea of the problem of mergers of congregations (a loss of

self-understanding). As scholars, we interpreted their global understanding from our conceptual framework (notably a narrative concept of the self based on the work of Paul Ricoeur).

The research problem (knowledge stream, Figure 2) is informed by both the theoretical frame of the research (such as the concept of narrative identity of the self by Paul Ricoeur) and the problem analysis in the practice stream. In the diocese, the merged community was labelled as 'Community of congregations' (German: '*Gemeinschaft der Gemeinschaften' = GdG)*. Many people considered the congregations to be community (the small 'we'), not the newly constructed community of congregations (the big 'WE').

In the practice stream (see Figure 2), the problem analysis is followed by a diagnosis of the causes of the problem and an understanding of the specific conditions of the solution of the problem. The role of the pastor (priest) and a lack of communication between members of different congregations were specific elements that emerged in the diagnosis in the practice stream and that were included in the conditions for a solution. This informed the construction of the intervention design in the knowledge stream (see Figure 3). The role of dialogic communication (for instance, telling and sharing stories) was considered to be an important aspect of the intervention design. The solution design in the knowledge stream (see Figure 3) informed the intervention plan in the practice stream. The intervention plan had generic elements in the three cases of the research, but also specific elements related to the context of the merged congregations.

The analysis of the intervention in the practice stream informs the reflection in the knowledge stream (see Figure 3). This reflection aims to construct generic knowledge about intervention designs. From this reflection, there is a loop backwards towards theoretical knowledge of interventions, which inform the construction of intervention plans in the practice stream. In practice-oriented research that focuses on generic knowledge about improvement of a specific type of problem, this loop is used to compare the effect of interventions in different cases. When the goal of practice-oriented research is the construction of a specific type of intervention, this loop is used to improve different prototypes of the design one wants to develop (see McKenney & Reeves 2012). Each loop represents the next stage in developing the design.

6. STEP 5: WHAT IS THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE RESEARCH FOR PRACTICE (PROFESSIONALS AND/OR CONGREGATIONS)?

The knowledge created in practice-oriented research contributes directly to the professional practice or development of congregations. It is not knowledge for theory development (expanding scientific knowledge), but generic (scientific) knowledge about interventions that aim to transform an actual situation into a desired outcome. In practice-oriented research, one needs to specify the contribution of the research in terms of actions, practices, settings and contexts of the professionals and/or congregations. McKenney and Reeves (2012) use a model of 4 Ps to specify the type of intervention, namely products, processes, programmes, and policies. The idea is that every intervention has a form in time and space. We will use this model and apply it to the field of pastoral interventions by ministers and/or congregational development. Within practical theology, there are different models of the fields of action of professionals and the tasks and domains of congregations. We will skip this discussion and include every type of action, such as liturgy, preaching, learning/catechesis, moral and spiritual development, diakonia, just and sustainable society, and so on, that is considered to be the aim of congregations and church leaders. In terms of congregations, the following products, processes, programmes and policies may be available:

- Products include resources that support learning and instruction, guidance and support such as an order of liturgy, a protocol for collective discernment, schemes of biblical text reading, catechetical guides, learning software, or hymn books.
- Processes are strategies, tactics, or sequences that support teaching and learning; these can include instructional approaches, hermeneutical strategies for text interpretation, conflict-management repertoires, or spiritual exercises.
- Programmes often combine products and processes to meet an intended (pastoral) goal, in the form of a seminar series, learning units of catechesis, a meditation course, or a professional development programme.
- Policies indicate a commitment of intent to act in a certain way in the process of decision-making. Policies can, to a certain extent, be strict (for example, some are guidelines, others are rules). Examples of policies are protocols of conflict mediation between pastor and

congregations, support structures for congregational members without jobs, and performance review structures.

The contribution of the research to schools is a professional development programme in which school leaders learn to guide a team of teachers towards improving the qualities of the school narrative (as expression of the identity of the school). Concerning this programme, we developed resources ('tool kits') that support the learning process. Some resources make use of gaming as learning process (for example, the inspiration game in which teachers learn to narrate their ultimate values).

7. STEP 6: DECIDE WHICH STAGE(S) OF THE INTERVENTION OR DESIGN CYCLE WILL BE THE FOCUS OF THE RESEARCH

Does the research comprise an entire cycle or a specific part thereof? The answer depends on two matters. What is your contribution to the action problem? What are your constraints in terms of time and resources? As far as the second question is concerned, a Masters student has less time for a research project than a PhD student. But we believe that a professional (minister) in a congregation can do this type of research. The research project will differ in scope and duration, depending on the constraints of the researcher.

However, we opine that the first question is by far the most important one. What do you want to contribute to the solution of the action problem? Maybe a thorough analysis of the problem can be the intended contribution to the action problem if a theoretical frame is lacking, and the problem has a strong impact on the way in which professionals and/or congregations are functioning (such as a spiritual, personal, or moral crisis of ministers in their ministry). Or, the extent of the goal is broad, such as an adult learning programme in catechesis, which is used in many congregations. Congregations put much time and effort into this programme, and it can be very important to evaluate the effects of this programme in view of the amount of time and effort invested therein.

One can distinguish different types of practice-oriented research related to the different stages of the intervention cycle. The types are labelled according to the stages that are the focus of the research (see Figure 4). For example, problem analytic research focuses only on problem analysis. Characteristic of this type of research are descriptive questions to map the situation in relation to the action problem (Who? What? Where?). What is

the impact on professionals and/or congregations? To what degree can this problem be influenced and changed?

Figure 4: Types of practice-oriented research related to different stages of the intervention cycle

INTERVENTION CYCLE	TYPE OF RESEARCH
Problem analysis	Problem analytic research
Diagnosis	Diagnostic research
Conditions of the solution	Conditions research
Intervention plan	Design research
Implementation	Intervention (process) research
Evaluation	Evaluation research

Another frequently used type of research is evaluation research. There are two types of evaluation: product evaluation and process evaluation. A product evaluation research (or summative evaluation) aims to study the effects after the intervention. In order to execute a product evaluation, we need to specify clearly the aims of an intervention. To gain insight into the effect of the intervention, we need to compare the post-test with the pre-test. Process evaluation (or formative evaluation) takes place during the intervention (*ex durante*) and aims to monitor the process during the intervention. In product evaluation, the process remains a 'black box'. If we want to improve an intervention (or a design of an intervention), we need to do process evaluation. In some congregational research, the emphasis will be on both the products and the processes (for example, the use of the Church Life Survey).[4]

8. STEP 7: FORMULATE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the formulation of research questions, we need to distinguish between improvement problems and construction problems. The practice stream of improvement problems follows the intervention cycle; the practice stream of construction problems follows the design cycle.

When the focus of the research is one specific stage of the intervention cycle, the research questions highlight the specific stage (descriptive questions in problem analytic research; evaluative questions in evaluation

4 See Hermans and Schoeman (2015: 53-56).

research). If the research incorporates the entire intervention cycle, there has to be a comparison between the actual situation (pre-test) and the outcome after the intervention (post-test). Both projects used as an example in this publication have this structure. The first research question focused on possible shifts in the quality of the organisation narrative. In order to establish shift, the quality of the organisation narrative at the pre-test and the post-test has to be analysed. The second question focused on the relation between the qualities that changed after the intervention and the processes implied in the intervention. For example, we incorporated the process of telling and sharing stories of the organisation in the intervention, because we presumed that they have a positive effect on the sharing of the organisational narrative. The third question is a comparative question between the cases included in the research. Which shift in quality of the organisational narrative is comparable between the cases? Are differences between the cases related to differences in the context and history of the organisations? The intervention used the same strategies and mechanisms in each case. If the outcome of the intervention is the same in all cases, the intervention seems to work in different contexts. If there are differences, we want to understand if they may be related to differences between the specific contexts of the cases. In the diocese of Aachen, the cases differed in terms of urbanisation (rural vs. inner-city).

In research on intervention designs, two crucial types of questions will be absent mostly in theory-oriented research and relate to the external criteria of practical theological research (see our article on Utility). External criteria refer to the *object* of research or the problem to be solved; the *needs* of the stakeholders as to the research and its results, and the type of *knowl*e.g. to be produced. With regard to the needs of stakeholders, the following questions are important. Is the design knowledge comprehensible for users? Is it relevant to the action problem they experience? In the eyes of the stakeholders, is the design sound and applicable in the setting in which they are working? How does the congregation react to and receive the intervention? With regard to the type of knowledge of design research, the following questions are important. In the eyes of the stakeholders, does the design capture the complexity of real-life situations? How does the intervention perform, in ways that were intended (for example, fidelity), and not planned (for example, adaptations, side effects)? Does the intervention bring change in the problem, and is this change sustainable?

9. STEP 8: DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

In the knowledge stream in practice-oriented research, concepts are defined in two stages (see Figure 2). First, there is the E_knowledge formulated in the theoretical frame. The concepts in this theoretical frame

represent the state of art with regard to a topic or issue. For example, in both the research on congregations and Catholic schools, we used Paul Ricoeur's (1992) philosophical concept of narrative identity in the polarity of character ("*idem-identity*") and self ("*ipse-identity*"). A literature review is carried out to assess if the problem is researchable and if design research can make a desired contribution to both problem resolution and scientific understanding (McKenney & Reeves 2012).

Secondly, conceptualization of ideas is present in the solution of the intervention design (of a professional development programme, for example). In a theoretical research project, this solution design would be based on the two preliminary steps in the knowledge stream (state of art knowledge and problem definition). In a practice-oriented research, the solution of the design is also informed by the conditions of the solution in the practice stream, such as the amount of time that can be invested, background in professional training, demographic setting in which ministers work, but also the kind of strategy to be used in congregations (for example, the development of a contextual missional ecclesiology) (Verschuren 2009:160). The conditions for the solution as well as the state of art knowledge play a decisive role in the formulation of the solution design. How are the ideas of the state of art and the conditions for the solution embodied in prototypes of the development programme? What changes must be made to the underlying ideas or the design itself in order to increase the plausibility and probability that it could meet the intended goals? In summary: the solution design is a theoretical frame for the intervention (N_knowledge), which is constructed both on the basis of E_knowledge and the conditions for the solution of the desired change (D_component).

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