Multi-Disciplinary Work
[≈ ‘tværfagligt samarbejde’]
in Denmark

An overview of the literature

Multi-disciplinary work (MDW) currently has a high priority on the agendas of Education, Social Care, and Health Care in Denmark. Politicians and civil servants in particular are promoting MDW as part of management renewal in these areas (e.g. with the LEAN line of thinking). The establishment of University Colleges in Denmark will inevitably enhance MDW further as they bring together training for many different professional bachelor degrees in the same institutions, e.g. nurse, teacher, social worker, physiotherapist and social educator. These trends towards enhanced MDW promote a need to obtain an overview of the published literature, which this article addresses. The review’s cut to MDW is the interplay between the frontline workers on an everyday level. The frontline workers’ everyday encounters are seen as one of the factors influencing decisions relating to children and young people in need of special support according the Social Services Act.
Definition of terms

The Danish studies referred to use different terms for MDW. Some authors precisely define these terms in a continuum, e.g. from multi-disciplinary working to inter-disciplinary working to trans-disciplinary working (Gammeltoft 2008). Others define them more broadly. The problem with the first alternative for a literature review is that various authors define the terms differently and they vary the number and the order of the elements in the continuums (compare e.g. Lauvås & Lauvås (2006) and Gammeltoft (2008)). I have therefore decided to define my main term broadly and have chosen to use the English term ‘Multi-Disciplinary Work’ (MDW), which can be said to be equivalent to the Danish term ‘tværfagligt samarbejde’. My chosen term, MDW, represents the mutual work between different educated frontline workers and can be both formal and informal, interagency or within one agency, and have various degrees of intensity and different venues (e.g. working together the whole day in the same office or only meeting once a week at different venues).

My term ‘children and young people in need of special support’ is simplified when compared to the definition in the Danish Social Services Act: ‘children and young people with physically or mentally reduced functionality or with another need for special support’. Egelund & Sundell (2001) point to this as a vague definition of the children and young people concerned, but nevertheless this definition does not lock complex social problems into small categories. Moreover, Egelund & Sundell (2001) claim that the vague definition of the children and young people concerned is not unique for Denmark.

An overview of the literature

The publications are dated from 1999 until the middle of 2008 (for publications before 1999 see Hansen (1999)). Only larger publications are included which deal with MDW as their main theme. This implies, for example, that individual smaller articles have been excluded. Around the year 2000 there was a boom in the practice literature in Denmark, which describes the outcome of MDW projects in the municipalities founded by SIBU (‘Særlig Indsats for de svagest stillede Børn og Unge’ = A specific effort for vulnerable children and youth). The National Board of Social Services (an independent subdivision of the Ministry of Social Affairs) started SIBU in 1995. Although, these publications are excluded in this review, compilations of some of these project descriptions have been included in Hansen (1999) and Borup and Nielsen (2000).

In Table I all studies are categorised as primary research, secondary research or practice and commentary publications. The three categories are imported from an English literature review on MDW: Frost (2005). The primary research category covers larger studies where the methods are clearly described. The secondary research
category includes publications which are mainly theoretical, but draw on the research of others, and/or provide commentaries on the research of others. Furthermore, secondary research covers smaller studies where the methods are more weakly described. The commentary and practice category includes publications based on practice initiatives and may include an element of primary research and/or a review of primary or secondary literature.

Table 1 demonstrates that only three studies can be characterised as primary research: Brandi (2008), Højholt (2001) and Ejrnæs (2006). Furthermore there is doubt about the extent to which Brandi (2008) and Højholt (2001) have the frontline workers’ MDW as their main theme. Further, it can be stated from Hansen (1999) that no Danish primary research publication can be found before 1999. In contrast Frost

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Main objective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brandi (2008)</td>
<td>Observations, interviews and documents</td>
<td>To study &quot;organisational learning” during a reorganisation in a municipality which promoted MDW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ejrnæs (2006)</td>
<td>Vignette-survey</td>
<td>To study how members from different professions make decisions in complicated cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Højholt (2001)</td>
<td>Practice research (semi structured interviews and observations)</td>
<td>To generate knowledge about how children (aged 6 -8 years) move between different spaces and different professionals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alleboern.dk (2008)</td>
<td>Semi structured interviews</td>
<td>To contribute to an enhancement of ‘The Good MDW’ for vulnerable children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hansen (1999)</td>
<td>Earlier research and other publications (e.g. practical and legislative)</td>
<td>To sum up the knowledge and research on MDW in Denmark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauvås &amp; Lauvås (2006)</td>
<td>Based on research from a long career in Norway</td>
<td>To give ideas for developing MDW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyder et al. (2005)</td>
<td>Documents and untranscripted interviews</td>
<td>To find relevant topics for training of MDW to students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egelund &amp; Sundell (2001)</td>
<td>Building on others research</td>
<td>To sum up research findings for working with Child Protective Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mielcke (1998)</td>
<td>Descriptions of real cases and interviews with the parents</td>
<td>To contribute to the development of methods in MDW</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nielsen &amp; Knudsen (2001)</td>
<td>An anthology of articles rooted in practices</td>
<td>To inspire further development of MDW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dansk Pædagogisk Forum (2001)</td>
<td>A anthology of 17 short articles (each 3-4 pages)</td>
<td>To give social educators strategies for working together with other professions with vulnerable children</td>
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(2005) categorises 35 publications as primary research on frontline workers’ MDW in the UK. In Norway there is likewise much more primary research on MDW (Hansen 1999).

The small amount of Danish literature covers a lot of issues which arise in respect of MDW. This large number of different issues in so few publications makes it hard to make any comparisons between the publications. Therefore the following reviews are mostly presented separately. Lastly, some common tendencies will be pointed out in a state of the art section. The reviews have been carried out from a critical stance to illuminate weaknesses and define deficiencies which future research can address.

**Brandi, 2008**

Brandi studies organisational learning during a reorganisation at the municipality of Gladsaxe. Brandi concludes that the coordination between the family department and the school department improved, as they established a new separate ‘visitation office’ which deals with extensive support in schools and replacements.

There are a few observations on the frontline workers’ thoughts and experiences with MDW in Brandi (2008). A relevant finding is that some frontline workers felt they were forced to undertake tasks which formerly belonged to others professions than their own; this gave rise to problems with the distribution of tasks. However, Brandi’s interpretations of the interviews are not deep enough for the focal point of this literature review, i.e. the interactions between of the frontline workers.

**Ejrnæs, 2006**

The research of Ejrnæs (2006) is based on quantitative research methodology using the vignette method. Firstly, Ejrnæs’ presents a finding showing that different professionals working with vulnerable children do, surprisingly, broadly agree on the main issues regarding child protection issues. Secondly, when looking at the details there is the same inconsistency within each of the profession as there is between the different professions. However, on several occasions Ejrnæs finds that the caseworkers have greater consensus than the three other professions, e.g. on pages 133 and 144, where one example shows that the caseworkers gives critics to psychologists.

Ejrnæs concludes that competencies of the different professionals and their separate bodies of knowledge are not a major factor for misunderstandings and conflict! Misunderstandings and conflict are rather linked to the professionals’ personal attitudes, even though these misunderstandings and conflicts are often clothed in the professionals’ discourses.

At the beginning of the book Ejrnæs comments several times on the unity of each of the professions, for example, on p. 19: ‘The four professions [teachers, social educators, health visitors and social workers] diverge clearly from each other due to their bodies of knowledge, which form the foundation for their work’ (my translation’). But this
study could alternatively, at the beginning of the research, address the question of how united each of the professions’ bodies of knowledge really are. There may perhaps exist some partly separate sub-body of knowledge inside each of the professions’ bodies of knowledge defined by, for example, specific long-lasting job experience and further education. For example, within the teacher body of knowledge there can be a special sub-body of knowledge among science teachers, AKT-teachers ['anti-bullying'-teachers] and teachers with management responsibilities. But the number of respondents is too small for doing research on such groupings within the professions. Even though I have doubted Ejrnæs’s explanations, it is a remarkable finding that members inside each profession have inconsistencies when compared with the fact that the professions’ members think they have a consensus.

**Højholt, 2001**

Charlotte Højholt has made many small comments about MDW in her significant volume of written texts. In Højholt (2001) there is a large section on MDW. The context of this study is that she followed some children from kindergarten via pre-school to school. In the book there are several descriptions of children in need of special support.

Højholt claims that in frontline workers’ discussions on MDW the children often “disappear”. Therefore in the light of critical psychology and practice research she firmly sets the children and their parents in the context of her research. Furthermore, she prefers to use the term cooperation instead of MDW. Højholt (2001) claims that MDW often individualises the problems without taking into account the context or a holistic view of the individual child. Furthermore, Højholt (2001) concludes that a distinctive feature of MDW is that the direction in the conversations changes all the time. This is due to the different places and positions that the frontline workers are situated in and their different professions.

It is crucial for Højholt (2005) that it is not possible to create an MDW cookery book, but that we need to be aware of the presence of different options for creating MDW. Højholt’s main focus is clearly not on the MDW between the frontline workers as in this literature review. Instead she often makes an effort to include the parents and the child/young person. Therefore it can be argued that in addition to her research there is a need to find out how the pure frontline workers’ MDW influences the handling of the problems relating to the children or young people concerned.

**Alleboern.dk, 2008**

The project ‘Hånd om alle børn’ was initiated by the Danish Union of Teachers and the Danish Association of Social Workers. In this review I am not reviewing the project as a whole, but simply concentrating on the articles which have been written under the guidance of a researcher.
A feeling, which was often expressed during the observations, was that “nothing happens”, even though everybody knew that something was happening! The explanation is that the parents and the frontline workers felt impatient because the problems were so pressing. The proposals for solutions to these problems are better communication skills between the different frontline workers. Furthermore they state that there is also a need for more attention and greater financial resources in order to improve MDW with children and young people in need of special support.

It is also suggested that the frontline workers are very good at judging when and why a case should be brought up anonymously, which they stress must only seldom be used. More often it should be done in proper collaboration with the parents and the child/young person. Furthermore, the parents should always be invited to MDW network meetings relating to their own cases. The child and the young person should be invited if appropriate, although experience has shown that the children and the young people do not often attend MDW meetings. It is necessary for both of the parents and possibly some affiliates to attend meetings, as it can be hard if there is only one of them among so many frontline workers Mørck (2008).

Likewise, there are critics of the “early intervention” strategies that often appear in MDW. In some cases the problems of some children are only temporary and there is no need for intervention which would add further stress. One example of this is if a divorce is managed properly (Brønnum et al. 2008).

This study can be characterised as having an idealistic perspective with emphasis on making the right choices, e.g. always involving the concerned clients and likewise there is strong emphasis on keeping client matters confidential. Others, for example, Hansen (2001) and Lauvås & Lauvås (2006), are more frank when they say that it is not appropriate to involve the concerned clients in some situations. Moreover, they are also drawing attention to the fact that various professionals are interpreting confidential matters in different ways as a part of their hierarchy fight.

**Hansen, 1999**

This book covers a lot of different perspectives on MDW with the main theme being an overview of the development of MDW in Denmark. He states that the first steps to a ‘new’ MDW approach with emphasis on prevention and early intervention were taken voluntarily by some municipalities around 1980. Before that, MDW was solely established when a case became too difficult for one frontline worker or one institution to handle. Such cases often comprise a complex nature of social problems and Hansen warns against seeing MDW as the solution. Rather, he stresses that MDW is a way of working.

A lot of material in the book comes from local projects initiated by SIBU. Hansen (1999) demonstrates that the outcome of one SIBU project was that it is crucial that all frontline MDW workers are willing to cooperate. Moreover it is crucial that they
are open to the approaches of the others. A single employee can ruin good MDW if he/she adopts an uncompromising stance. Otherwise, Hansen (1999) emphasis that it is necessary to highlight prejudice against each others’ professions. This claim and others in Hansen (1999) can been seen as being weak as there is no fieldwork supporting them.

**Lauvås & Lauvås, 2006**

Although most cases in this book are Health Care cases, Lauvås & Lauvås’ (2006) book is being promoted for Health Care, Social Care and Educational settings. This is the only book written in Danish which can be called a textbook on MDW, although this is originally a Norwegian publication. The book’s strength is that it covers a lot of perspectives on MDW, e.g. those of social psychology, professions, organisational and knowledge sociology. Furthermore, some of the issues taken up in the book are: trust vs. mistrust, teambuilding and communication.

The book often promotes the idea that the individual professions most not lose their characteristics when engaged in MDW. On the other hand, some chapters state that the professions and their characteristics are often obstacles to MDW, see for example pages 42, 108 and 197. No attempt is made to bridge these contradictions or even to recognize them in the book. Compared to this, Laursen et al. (1996) are aware of the contradictory tensions during MDW and they state the simultaneous presence of both a deprofessionalization and a further professionalization.

Lauvås & Lauvås’ (2006) make an important contribution to MDW in the communication section. They claim the importance of being aware of two different levels of communication in respect of MDW. The first level is the actual case and the next level is the relations between the frontline workers. Although the frontline workers are sometimes assuming that they are communicating on the case, the focus is actually on the power relations between them.

A remarkable thing about this book is that there are very few references to primary research on MDW. The knowledge is rather built on theoretical perspectives, which mainly date back to the 1970s to 1990s. This must be partly due to the first Norwegian version of the book in 1995.

**Nielsen & Knudsen (Ed.), 2001**

This compilation of articles is written by consultants, researchers, civil servants and practitioners. In this review I will only review three articles, one by a consultant and two by practitioners. To a certain degree these selected articles represent the contents in the anthology.

Nielsen (2001), a consultant, states that MDW often shifts focus from the real case, the children, to organisational matters. He goes on to claim that the core issue is to deal with the pride of the different profession in their competencies, which involves the hi-
erarchy between the professions and the difficulties experienced in setting up boundaries between the professions’ areas. Nielsen sees a way forward if frontline workers are being honest about their incompleteness towards each other. This will probably better equip the frontline workers to meet and deal with the incompleteness of these children and young people in their families. According to what I just have written above I doubt if Bundgaard Nielsen himself has missed some of the focus of the real case, ‘the children’, as he himself states at the beginning of his article.

Knudsen (2001) explains that usually it is easy to set the overriding purpose of MDW, but on the everyday level it usually gets more complicated. Therefore when enhancing MDW it is important to prioritise it with extra time and will, both by the individual frontline worker and by the board of directors. Like Knudsen (2001), Hansen (2001) claims the importance of defining common concepts when working with MDW. Hansen (2001) claims that it is often seen how the matter of client confidentiality is used by professions to promote their professions’ rights over those of others. She puts emphasis on the staff’s need for being aware of multiple perspectives. Hansen (2001) believes in a way forward for MDW because nowadays the legislators are aware of it and the different types of training are more mixed in their content than previously. Hansen’s article can been seen as having been written from a normative stance in which she is promoting MDW by using an argument about serving children and young people in the best way.

Other studies
The only Danish study which deals with MDW in training is Lyder et al. (2005). They carried out a study with the objective of finding relevant topics for training student teachers, student social care workers and student social educators in MDW. They found that frontline workers have insufficient knowledge of other professions’ qualities. Likewise they observed an existence of a hierarchy between the professions.

Egelund & Sundell (2001) focus on the investigations and the subsequent implications that concern cases relating to child protective services as the focal point in their publication. In a chapter on MDW Egelund & Sundell (2001) point to the fact that the term ‘MDW’ has a very positive timbre. Nevertheless, no research indicates that the outcome of MDW is more effective than other methods. Rather, the research reveals that it is extremely hard to establish good MDW. Egelund & Sundell (2001) state that there are few regulations and formal procedures on MDW in Denmark compared to England. Further, they highlight how research findings from Sweden reveal that social workers often claim that they had MDW with members of other professions although the latter did not claim they had MDW with the social workers. Moreover, social workers are more satisfied with MDW than other professionals (Sundell & Colbiörnsen 1996; Boklund 1997).

Mielcke’s (1998) publication is based on descriptions of real cases relating to chil-
Mielcke’s objective is to contribute to the development of methods in MDW. However, she looks at physiotherapists and psychologists in isolation. She concludes that parents can feel overwhelmed by meeting too many frontline workers and that it is important for the frontline workers to speak their own professional ‘language’ when doing MDW.

Dansk Pædagogisk Forum (2001) is an anthology of 17 short articles. The aim is to give social educators strategies for working with other professions with vulnerable children. In this publication it is pointed out that social educators are sometimes seen as being at the bottom of the hierarchy of professions in MDW. Axelsen (2004) demonstrates that unlike teachers and social workers, health visitors often feel very lonely in MDW as they do not have any colleges at the locations.

State of the art of the Danish MDW literature
I will now draw attention to some tendencies which arise in several of the publications and finally make a contemporary state of the art of the quality of the Danish literature on MDW, painted with a broad brush.

A review of the literature has demonstrated the existence of many different MDW practices in Denmark – see also Borup & Nielsen (2001). This variety of practices is probably due to the special Danish relationship between the national government, which is responsible for legislation, and the municipalities, who locally, to a high degree, decide how their services are carried out.

Several sources point out that we are often mistaken in thinking that MDW is a new intervention. Moreover, the literature review reveals that there are more problems present in MDW than we often initially anticipate. This is something to be aware of when enhancing of MDW.

Many of the publications contain a theme about an ongoing fight for a place in the hierarchy between the professions, which, for example, arises with the distribution of tasks and different interpretations of client confidentiality matters. For example, many publications indicate that there is tension between the psychologists and the social workers (Ejrnæs 2006; Bronnum et al. 2008; Brandi 2008). One reason may relate to the nature of the different types of training. Psychologists in general have 5 years theoretical training (BA/BSc (3 years) and Cand. (2 years)), whereas social workers have more practice oriented training (a 3 ½ - 4 year professional bachelor degree). Another reason could be the diverse theoretical initial points for psychology and social work sciences. Put into practice these differences imply that psychologists normally only have a consultation role with the involved children/young people, whereas the social workers work more with the whole context. In contrast, the Ejrnæs (2006) study showed that the different professions have more consistencies then they assume. This finding is so interesting that it require further investigation.

When delving deep into the literature it can be seen that the research quality varies
greatly in Danish MDW publications. Brandi (2008) covers a lot of perspectives in his many interviews and can be criticised for missing an in-depth interpretation of the interviews. Højholt (2001) has a vague description of her theoretical and methodological stance, which, however, can be found in Højholt (2006). Ejrnæs’s (2006) survey is based on a small number of respondents if we want to test detailed hypothesis. The Alleboern (2008) articles do not contain a methodology section or criticism of their own framework. Hansen (1999) includes very few traces of his own research. Egelund & Sundell (2001) and Lauvås & Lauvås (2006) do not refer to research from Denmark. The articles in Nielsen & Knudsen (2001) are mostly written without any research and sometimes from a highly normative stance. However, this does not imply that the literature is unusable – there are many interesting perspectives in the Danish literature! But the conclusion of this article is a call for more primary research on MDW in Denmark. Furthermore, it is useful to have some contrasting perspectives with other countries. The reason for this is that we in Denmark often look to the research of other countries as we have a lack of MDW research.

(Endnotes)

1. A Professional Bachelor’s degree (PBD) is awarded after 3 to 4 years of study (180-240 ECTS points). The programmes provide all students with a solid theoretical knowledge and understanding of how to apply theory to professional practice. A PBD qualifies one to enter a specific position on the labour market and most PBds give access to master’s studies. (Source: http://www.ciriusonline.dk/Default.aspx?ID=4483).

2. The Social Educator PBD (’Pedagog’) qualifies one to undertake professional employment in Danish public and private state-authorized social institutions, e.g. ordinary pre-schools and early childhood day care, ordinary after-schools, sports and play activities for youth and youngsters, and special therapeutic institutions and social community work. (Source: http://www.socialeducator.dk/).

3. The following Danish researchers and practitioners who have worked with MDW for several years have validated my choice from the search result as a list of all significant Danish publications on MDW: Morten Ejrnæs (Associate Professor at Den Sociale Højskole - København), Karen Kildedal (Associate Professor at Aalborg University), Ulrik Brandi (Associate Professor at the School of Education at Aarhus University) and Jens Bundgaard Nielsen (Private MDW Consultant).

4. ‘De fire faggrupper [lærere, pædagoger, sundhedsplejersker og socialrådgivere] adskiller sig afgørende fra hinanden med hensyn til det vidensgrundlag, de har for deres arbejde.’
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Summaries

This article reviews literature on Multi-Disciplinary Work (MDW) for children and young people in need of special support, as defined by the Danish Social Services Act. The focus is on frontline workers’ everyday encounters with each other. The author reviews all significant Danish publications between 1999 and until the middle of 2008. The publications are categorised as one of the following: primary research, secondary research, and practice and commentary literature. Although there has been an increase in the promotion of MDW with an emphasis on early intervention and prevention during the last 30 years, this literature review reveals a lack of research publications. Even though the literature review advocates that the quality of existing Danish research literature is varying, it also demonstrates that there are several good sources which can be used when writing theoretically about MDW or for enhancing MDW on a practice level in Denmark as well in other Nordic countries.

Monitieteinen työ Tanskassa