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When practice and research meet: demonstration of a practice research methodology in co-producing an assessment tool

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ABSTRACT

Practice research is a meeting point between practice and research involving collaborations and negotiations to ensure findings from research are usable to improve services and living conditions. It is still embryonic and can be challenging for novice researchers or experienced researchers without adequate understanding. For social science researchers and practitioners who are interested in improving service delivery and shaping positive outcomes, practice research methodology is a go-to approach. However, there is inadequate clarity about how core theoretical foundations of practice research are represented in the methodology. In this article, we demonstrate the application of a practice research methodology in the co-production of an assessment tool for social workers in Ghana. While our case study focused on the production of knowledge within social work practice, the principles and theories of practice research are applicable to other cognate social sciences disciplines where an aim is to produce knowledge usable in practice.

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Introduction

Practice research characterises a meeting point between practice and research. In this article, we demonstrate a practice research methodology in the co-production of a child maintenance assessment tool for social workers in Ghana. The analysis will base on the perspective of researchers and practitioners who collaborated on the project. This is an ideal depiction of practice research itself as both practice and research have come together not only to work on the research project but also to develop this article. Collaborative partnerships and negotiations are key to

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practice research (Parsons, 2021). In the negotiations, neither practice nor research must completely give up their special interests, the different interests are important for both parties and significant to society as well (Julkunen & Uggerhøj, 2016; Uggerhøj, 2014). The researchers ensured that the research project was conducted through the systematic processes required for social sciences research. On the other hand, the practitioners ensured that the project is relevant for their day-to-day work activities and meaningful for the people they serve. We will elaborate later in this article some of the negotiations that were carried out between practice and research. Practice research is an embryonic area, with its origins traced to a first International Conference on Practice Research in the United Kingdom in 2008 (Fook & Evans, 2011). We contribute to the emerging methodological literature on practice research by showing how our research with practice was carried out, highlighting features of negotiations, collaboration and partnership. While our case study focused on the production of knowledge within social work practice, the principles and methodology are applicable to other social sciences disciplines where an aim is to produce knowledge usable in practice.

The main focus of this article is an analysis of the theoretical foundations, procedures and experiences learnt within this practice research project. Two social workers (hereinafter practitioner-researchers), were essential to the research project, bringing their experience from practice. In this article, we present key discussions with partners on the project, the processes of learning and sharing that transpired leading up to the co-production of the Child Maintenance Assessment Tool (CMAT). In addition to the practitioner-researchers, we collaborated with the Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs) within Ashanti, Greater Accra and Northern regions working under the Local Government Service in Ghana where frontline social workers operate.

The practitioner-researchers were social workers who brought their experiences and lessons from practice to the project. Within their role, they were expected to be open to knowing about fundamental research methods to carry out the project. They both held postgraduate degrees with relevant learning on research methodology. They were also offered training by the academic researchers on interviewing skills. However, they do not become researchers per se, their main role was to use knowledge from practice (Carnochan & Austin, 2015). It is the potential for crossing the research and practice boundaries that sets practice research apart from traditional methodologies.

In the next sections, we provide an overview of the project with information on the different stakeholders involved. We then consider the theoretical foundations of practice research that informed our approach and further show how the concepts are used in practice. The presentation on our practice research approach describes our collaboration with practitioner-researchers and stakeholders at various stages throughout the article. For instance, while stakeholders played key role in a workshop, practitioner-researchers were constantly involved at various stages of the research. A visual presentation of our approach offers insights into the different stages and the collaborations and negotiations that transpired. We conclude the article by offering challenges and opportunities of the practice research framework.

Overview of the project

The project to co-produce the CMAT was conducted with social workers across three regions in Ghana; Ashanti, Greater Accra and Northern. Geographically, these three regions represent the northern, southern, and middle zones. We selected 19 district offices in the three regions that are noted for handling a high number of child maintenance cases. Through a workshop and interviews, social workers within the selected districts were invited to co-design the project and conduct the research on developing the CMAT. The project was designed to address the increasing evidence on the challenges with assessing child maintenance cases in Ghana. Recent studies revealed that social workers do not engage in holistic assessment of child maintenance cases, due to the lack of child maintenance-specific assessment tools (Abdullah, Ayim, et al., 2021). The lack of child maintenance-specific tools has prompted arbitrary practice among social workers when handling the cases (Cudjoe et al., 2024). The Department of Social Welfare (DSW) in partnership with UNICEF-Ghana developed a Case Management Standard Operating Procedures for Children in Need of Care and Protection, herein the SOP (Case Management SOP, 2018), to be used by social workers in their casework with children and families.

Although the SOP contains 14 different Forms, the phrase ‘child maintenance’ appears only once in the document, making it unclear how these Forms address maintenance issues. A 2021 report revealed that child maintenance cases represented around 80% of the total child protection cases reported to social workers in Ghana (Abdullah et al., 2024). Also, some Ghanaian studies have evidenced the negative outcomes for families and children when child maintenance cases are not adequately assessed and handled by social workers (Abdullah, Manful, et al., 2021; Awortwe et al., 2020). Hence, it was quite surprising that there was no assessment guidance dedicated for child maintenance cases. These findings necessitated the need to develop a tool for assessing child maintenance cases to guide social work practice in Ghana. The evidence of a lack an assessment tool was presented to the practitioner-researchers who supported the idea, leading to further engagements to develop the CMAT. Hence, the project was informed by the need to solve a problem for social workers in dealing with child maintenance cases, enabling a more consistent and standardised way of working with families.

Definition and theoretical positions of practice research

Practice research did not originate in a vacuum. However, unlike other research approaches, this is relatively new, allowing for different ways of understanding. An approach to practice research opens the door to participatory designs which is both a challenge and an opportunity as it overlaps with other research approaches (Uggerhøj, 2011). Practice research involves dialogue, negotiations and compromises between researchers, practitioners and citizens that could lead to a change in practice (Chen et al., 2024; Uggerhøj et al., 2018). Practitioners and citizens are active part of the research process, not simply being object in the research process. Practice research may have some parallels with other participatory designs such as community-based practice research (CBPR) and participatory action research (PAR). Both practice research and PAR maintain a goal to produce knowledge usable in the real-world. However, PAR favours

methods that produce emancipatory social change while methods employed in practice research emphasise collaboration and negotiation (Cornish et al., 2023). CBPR involves building relationships with community members and establishing partnerships to actively engage stakeholders throughout the research process (Amauchi et al., 2022). On the other hand, engagement with community members is not mandatory within practice research. Such approach will depend on the nature of the research. A common denominator in all approaches is their participatory interface, although the way they engage and with whom they engage with, could differ depending on research goals. In this section, we briefly consider theories related to *science of the concrete* and *mode 2 knowledge production* (Andersen et al., 2020) as key theoretical positions that influenced our research.

We take a broad definition of stakeholders to refer to individuals, groups or organisations with an interest or role in the project and/or are impacted by the project. Different individuals and organisations were involved as stakeholders throughout the project, with which we have referred to at different stages in the description of the process. The stakeholders were defined and identified by the academic researchers whose work in the area gave them an idea of the individuals and groups to whom the project is of interest. We did not engage citizens such as parents or young people in the project as this was beyond the scope of the project. The academic researchers begun this project with stakeholders as practitioners for which funding was sought. While citizen involvement would be vital to produce knowledge impacting end-users (Amauchi et al., 2022), budgetary constraints did not allow for active citizen participation.

Science of the concrete

Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that science of the concrete is pragmatic, shows relevance for its purpose and flexible. It entails getting close to reality (conducting research close to the phenomenon being studied); emphasising little things (studying the major in the minor); examining practical activities and everyday issues; choosing research methodology based on context and engaging with different voices where no voice claims final authority. Science of the concrete further represents the need to engage in dialogue with those being studied, other researchers, decision-makers and key actors in the field (Austin & Isokuoritti, 2016). This dialogue-oriented, context-dependent and user-focused approach forms the philosophical base of practice research. Our project embodied key foundations of science of the concrete. We engaged with social workers in the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development (DSWCD), which is a state organisation recognised for handling child maintenance cases. This enabled us to work with practitioners at where the practice of child maintenance assessments occurred. Further, while the SOP was used by social workers, there was no assessment tool specifically for assessing child maintenance. We were focusing on the 'little thing', a missing tool to assess these cases, to make larger contributions and ask bigger questions considering that issues of non-maintenance are the highest numbers of cases reported to the DSWCD. In addition, throughout the project, we collaborated with social workers, social work managers, administrators and policymakers which embodies the user-focused philosophy of science of the concrete.

Mode 2 knowledge production

In addition to science of the concrete, practice research is closely linked to Mode 2 knowledge production which was evident in our research project. Mode 1 knowledge production is situated within traditional research approaches where the academic researcher is seen as the primary hub of knowledge, responsible for the design of the study, analysis and the production of outputs which is based on common academic norms. On the contrary, Mode 2 knowledge production emphasises an application-oriented stance, where both research methodology and findings are discussed with partners and stakeholders for whom the project is intended (Uggerhøj, 2011). There is an intersection of multiple players with each representing different interests and contributing to multiple approaches, competencies and ideas. We worked with frontline practitioners, managers and decision-makers who came to the workshop with different interests. Although our partners in practice had a common goal to identify the best way to assess child maintenance cases, their approach and inputs to the project differed based on their interests. Similarly, inputs from the academic researchers to the project were shaped by their engagements with the broader literature on the topic. This created a horizontal network and collaboration where the different interests and competencies were not abandoned but acknowledged. So, instead of solving these conflicts, mode 2 knowledge production emphasises working within these different interests and needs (Andersen et al., 2020).

Our practice research approach

A central feature of practice research is that the research is conducted in close collaboration with practice (Parsons, 2021), with those for whom the research is about. Practice research maintains key components of the traditional research process which is then integrated with models and approaches from practice. In this section, we present the contents of our collaboration and negotiation from the beginning to the end of our project which offers insights for researchers thinking to conduct research where practice takes place and produce knowledge, not for its own sake, but that are ultimately usable.

Developing research questions from problems

Our research questions stemmed from ‘real problems’ in practice, suggesting that this was an everyday concern of practice as situated within science of the concrete. This research project came from our previous publications on child maintenance involving interviews with frontline social workers (Abdullah et al., 2024; Cudjoe et al., 2024). Reports from the DSWCD indicate that assessment of child maintenance cases makes up a significant part of casework among social workers in Ghana. In one study (Cudjoe et al., 2024), we sought to understand what social workers considered when assessing child maintenance cases. These were important steps in our research on child maintenance as it enabled us to identify key themes that social workers factored in their assessment of cases. The study opened up possibilities to consider the development of a specific assessment tool for child maintenance cases. Hence, our research questions

were developed out of a pressing need from social workers to develop a uniform tool to aid in the assessments of child maintenance cases.

Both science of the concrete and mode 2 knowledge production were prevalent at these early stages as the practitioner-researchers became the gateway to assess the usability of the project to practice. The practitioner-researchers were integral to communicating initial ideas to their colleagues and opening up possibilities for further engagements. They contributed to thinking about the feasibility of the project in terms of its aim to produce a child maintenance assessment tool to be used by social workers. Working together with the practitioner-researchers ensured that the academic researchers were involved in the community where knowledge is to be used. An important aspect of the project was to translate research into practice, so a deliberate consideration of practitioner involvement was key. It also fosters the notion of equality in research, enhancing ethical values and moving against participatory tokenism (Andersen et al., 2020). A webinar was organised among the project team to discuss the research and deliberate the strategies to meet its aims. At the webinar, the two practitioner-researchers learnt about the project from the perspective of the academics. The academic researchers also received new information about how the project may or may not be received by social workers. For example, there were tensions about being cautious not to duplicate the already existing SOP used by social workers. This was well received as although the goal of our project was to develop a tool to be used specifically for child maintenance cases, there was a level of concern considering that the SOP was also used for child maintenance cases. This begged the question, what will make our tool different from the SOP? Through discussions, both partners on the team (academics and practitioners) understood that the SOP is a universal tool for all cases, relatively bulky and time-consuming. Hence, an investigation leading to the development of a child maintenance-specific tool was worthwhile. Following this decision, a practitioner-led workshop was organised among practitioners to further think about the need for the tool among a wider group and potentially share initial ideas of how the tool could look like.

Workshop

A practitioner-led workshop was organised in November 2023 to discuss the need for a child maintenance assessment tool among social workers and present initial views about areas of interest that could be a focus for the tool. The workshop was attended by 33 stakeholders including frontline social workers, social work managers, administrators and policymakers from Greater Accra, Kumasi and Tamale MMDAs in Ghana. One of the academic researchers attended the workshop not to lead or define the nature of the workshop but to moderate some activities including being interviewed by media personnel (GhanaWeb, 2025). The workshop was to consolidate the views of the different stakeholders about the need for the tool. The stakeholders represented different interests/needs and perspectives about the problem and its solution. The stakeholders can be primarily grouped into two; the first part were policymakers/managers who maintained the relevance of the SOP in assessing child maintenance cases but welcomed innovations to address drawbacks. The second, frontline practitioners, were in strong support of the new tool, pointing to the shortfalls of the SOP with child maintenance cases. Overall, both groups saw a space to be filled by a new tool but the levels of resistance to the idea differed. The application-oriented stance of the project, as embodied within mode 2

knowledge production creates complexities in engaging with stakeholders on different levels. The complexities emanate from the multiple perspectives which enriches the research process and requires a consideration of different viewpoints. The difference of perspectives between policymakers/managers and frontline practitioners were not resolved in the timespan of the project. The team plans to address this in future research.

Activities of the workshop were led by one of the practitioner-researchers. At the workshop, three real-life child maintenance cases were discussed in groups of three to highlight the assessment processes involved. During the discussions, the case studies were used to bring different views and opinions related to how social workers handled cases in their districts when such complaints were received. While discussions revealed general features considered within assessments, there were also different approaches in managing such cases, sometimes pertaining to the local context and cultural practices in particular settings. For instance, a social worker in the Tamale Metropolitan Assembly indicated the importance of using farm produce as part of contributions towards the child's maintenance. Relatedly, social workers recommended taking advantage of seasons where demand for farm produce was high, collecting significant parts of the maintenance amount during this period. [Figures 1 and 2](#) present images from the workshop.

Of 21 attendees who completed a workshop feedback form, all agreed that a child maintenance assessment tool was needed. The discussions at the workshop and the overwhelming support for the tool was significant. This is also central to practice research, embodying the production of knowledge at the place where practice occurs. Following the workshop, there was further ambition within the research team to pursue the project of developing the child maintenance assessment tool. Of course, this was the aim of the project prior to the workshop. However, having the idea supported by practitioners who would be using the tool was instrumental. After all, a purpose of practice research is to generate research findings which are usable in practice ([Mathiassen, 2002](#)). The workshop was integral to this as it ensured that the users of the knowledge from the project have been consulted, shared their ideas and showed the



Figure 1. Practitioner-led workshop.



Figure 2. Practitioner-led workshop.

relevance of the project to the work they do. This reflects elements of both science of the concrete and mode 2 knowledge production, emphasising bottom-up processes and working closely with end users of scientific knowledge (Julkunen & Uggerhoj, 2016; Uggerhøj, 2011). After the workshop, interviews were conducted with social workers to contribute to identifying key themes to make up the child maintenance assessment tool.

The interview process

Ethical approval was gained from the University of Essex Ethics Sub-Committee (ETH2324-0078) before interviews were conducted. The two practitioner-researchers conducted interviews with 25 social workers as part of the project to contribute to the generation of ideas for the development of the tool. Considering that this project was done close to practice, interviews conducted by practitioner-researchers ensured questions relevant to practice were asked. This enabled them to introduce their own perspectives during interviews, fostering an application-oriented stance within a mode 2 knowledge production framework. Prior to the interviews, there was a meeting between the academic researchers and practitioner-researchers to discuss some basic features of conducting qualitative interviews. The academics provided information about fundamental practices guiding qualitative interviews; asking open-ended questions, not interfering when participants are talking, maintaining flexibility to ensure that participants speak from their own experience while ensuring that participant statements do not move away from the research objectives and not asking leading questions (Bhattacharya, 2017; Gudkova, 2018). The interviews were semi-structured, with the practitioner-researchers using an interview guide to ask questions. Initial interview questions were listed by the academic researchers which were then presented to the practitioner-researchers to reflect on and make changes as appropriate. The practitioner-researchers contributed to refining questions on the interview guide, bringing their experiences as practitioners who have worked on child maintenance cases. The interview guide contained six questions.

The interviews were conducted at the offices of the participants. The practitioner-researchers deemed this appropriate and convenient as it was more difficult and expensive to interview participants at their homes. This reflects practice making key decisions about methods without intrusion from academic researchers, embodying science of the concrete where the chosen method is context-dependent. The two practitioner-researchers were asked to conduct one pilot interview each and share with the academic researchers for feedback. This was important because the academic researchers wanted to make sure the interviews were conducted to standard. In this first check, the academic researchers evaluated the audio recordings and made recommendations to inform further interviews. A key observation here was that the interviews were relatively short, about 15 minutes each. This may have been due to their familiarity with social workers' practices which may have led them to limit their probing into something they may already know. Such potential biases were addressed in discussions with academic researchers. Feedback from academics to practitioner-researchers was to give adequate time for participants to explore in depth key issues and themes before moving onto different topics. They were also made aware to pick up on interesting points mentioned by participants for further probing and not focus a lot of their attention on questions on the interview guide. Following the feedback, practitioner-researchers made amendments to their interviews which improved its length and quality, with interviews averaging 40 minutes. It is a key part of practice research that partners are able to maintain their turf (Uggerhøj, 2014). In this illustration, the turf belonged to academics who ensured that the interviews were conducted in an open, natural and flexible manner characterising fundamental qualitative research interviews.

Analysis: developing the CMAT

The interviews from the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim onto a Word document which were analysed by the lead author and a research assistant. Together with data from the practitioner-led workshop, the analysis formed the basis for developing the CMAT. Analysis of the interview data adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to develop themes forming areas of interest for the CMAT. The iterative nature characterising the development of the CMAT is part of the horizontal network of collaboration which acknowledges different needs and interests. Through negotiation and discussions with practitioner-researchers, the tool was developed iteratively, with both a first and second attempt. We have presented both attempts in this section for readers to appreciate the collaborative nature of our approach. Our focus here is to show the nature of the collaborative processes involved in the creation of contents for the CMAT. As a result of this, we are not reporting on step-by-step processes for analysing the interview and workshop data.

First attempt

Based on the analysis of data from the workshop and individual interviews from social workers, a 'tool' was created to be used for assessing cases related to child maintenance. The tool (see Table 1) was initially developed by academics on the project and shared with the practitioner-researchers for discussion. The discussion was necessary as part of our commitment to science of the concrete and mode 2 knowledge production. It was an

Table 1. Checklist items for child maintenance assessment.

Information on respondent and complainant

Financial capability of parents

- Collect data about father and mothers' occupation.
- Can you confirm their earnings from formal occupation? This can help determine maintenance amount.
- Have you asked about alternate sources of income, including rent, trading activities, income from farming?

Causes of non-maintenance

- Ask about barriers to employment.
- Are they aware of legal obligations to care for their child? Refer to Children's Act
- Find out if there are personal challenges to taking care of child (physical, mental health challenges)

Role of parents

- Have you informed or educated both parents about their roles or responsibilities in child's life? You can refer them to the Children's Act.
- Have you assessed the level of responsibility taken by each parent and how they meet the daily needs of the child?
- Ask about the time and efforts dedicated to parenting.
- Enquire about how parents address and correct child's behaviour.

Details concerning the child

Health details of child

- Does the child suffer from any physical or mental health issue?
- Does the child have health insurance?
- Does the child have any special needs?

Child's nutrition

- Check if child is having regular meals.
- Does child have access to decent drinking water?

Child's education

- Is the child enrolled in school? If not, explore why.
- Ask about child's performance in school. Know about the child's school attendance.

Accommodation arrangement

- Have you assessed child's living situation? Is it a decent house?
- Is the living environment safe for a child?
- Who is living with the child?

SUPPLEMENTARY CHECKLIST ITEMS

Information on respondent and complainant

Patrilineal system/responsibility of father

- Have you discussed the role of fathers in caring for their children in their community with the parent?

Mothers' responsibility

- Consider what caregiving responsibilities are performed by the mother.
- How does the woman contribute to support the man?

Community based supports

- If parents are not financially capable what alternatives have been explored?
- Are there any community-based supports or NGOs supporting the child?

Religion and cultural practices

- Have you collected information on the religion of the parents? Does religion influence the way parents may not care for the child? Do you think polygamy may be hindering financial support to the child?

Maintenance amount

- Has a fixed maintenance amount been decided on?

Details concerning the child

Birth certificate

- Is it important to collect information about the child's birth certificate? This can be useful where there are disagreements about parental rights.

Agreements reached?

If any agreements have been reached between the respondent and complainant, or any other parties present, such as how much is paid as maintenance, who makes the payment, who takes the child to school, how are hospital bills for the child shared, it may be important to put these agreements in writing and have them signed by parties involved.

essential part of the project because if we were to recommend a tool to be used by social workers, then insights from practitioners with first-hand experience of working with the specific cases was *sine qua non*. Discussion with the social workers about the initial tool was to decide whether this was an appropriate assessment tool to work with maintenance cases. Based on discussions with the practitioner-researchers, it was highlighted that the

tool was not suitable for casework. In particular, it was identified that the questions on the tool were not exactly directed to the clients. The questions appeared to be for the social workers' reflection rather than asking the clients to gather relevant data for assessment. The practitioner-researchers also mentioned the need for multiple-choice questions which was a feature in their casework assessments. The practitioner-researchers had a key role here, addressing the current shortfalls in the tool which could have inhibited the application-oriented stance taken by the project.

In addition, the practitioner-researchers raised the need to structure the tool in a way similar to the SOP. This was because it was identified that social workers may be more open to using a new tool developed based on a practice they were familiar with. Also, there were deliberations about whether this would be called a 'tool' or a 'checklist'. The plan for the project was to develop a tool to be used by social workers in their practices, not necessarily to complement an existing framework. By using the word 'checklist' (see [Table 1](#)), the impression we got from discussions among the team was that this would not be a mainstay for assessing child maintenance cases but rather something that is used alongside the SOP. However, this would have gone contrary to our expectations to develop a tool exclusively for child maintenance assessment as this was lacking within the DSWCD. Consequently, the decision was to rename this a 'tool' to meet our aim to produce something that will be actively used by social workers in their assessment of child maintenance cases.

Second attempt

After discussions between the academics and practitioner-researchers on the initial checklist, the lead author collated views from the team to revise the tool. Engagements with practitioner-researchers demonstrate commitments to key tenets of theories of science of the concrete and mode 2 knowledge production like working close with practice, mutual collaborations and taking lessons from practice to shape research outcomes. At the point, the goal was to ensure that the views from practice and research are honestly reflected in a final tool. Of course, the stakeholders from the workshop had their own motivations for suggesting particular changes to the tool which often came from their practice experience. On the other hand, the academic researchers were also influenced by their previous work on child maintenance in Ghana where they adapted key points of interest about what should be considered when assessing such cases. However, it is important to note that, in practice research, neither practice nor research takes precedence over the other (Uggerhøj, 2014), the goal is to work together through collaboration and negotiation in a way that meets the needs of users. In our case, the first attempt to developing the tool characterises the negotiations that occurred.

As can be seen in the final tool (see Supplementary file), the CMAT was co-produced with practitioners based on the negotiations that occurred in the first attempt. For example, references have been made to the SOP. It was to communicate to social workers that we were not re-inventing the wheel but developing a tool based on already existing information.

Also, we moved from the word 'Checklist' to 'Tool' to better reflect the aim of the project and to create the awareness that this was dedicated to assessing child maintenance cases. Finally, the CMAT included multiple-choice questions which was a key concern raised by the practitioner-researchers after reviewing the initial checklist. After the lead

author had completed the tool, it was shared with the team including practitioner-researchers for comments. This was seen as a significant improvement by the practitioner-researchers. Few changes were recommended by the practitioner-researchers including making room for referral to be made where needed, including information on available supports outside the family and details related to the physical and mental health of children. All these recommendations have been reflected in the CMAT. This is to further evidence the iterative and collaborative nature of the process, going back and forth to ensure that the different needs and interests are reflected in outputs from the project.

A visual representation of the practice research approach

The processes described above are presented in a visual diagram in [Figure 3](#) to help readers easily appreciate our practice research approach leading to the co-production of the CMAT. Ownership of the research process belongs to both academic and practitioner-researchers on the project. As has been shown throughout, there are points where either academic or practitioner-researchers take the lead in decision-making for some aspects of the research. Nonetheless, collaboration and negotiation are central. In so doing, social work practice benefits from the subject and theoretical expertise of academics to shape understanding mechanisms underlying practice decisions. In line with this, the role of the researchers is to collaborate, as much as possible, at different stages. The omission of service user perspectives is a limitation here because they are important

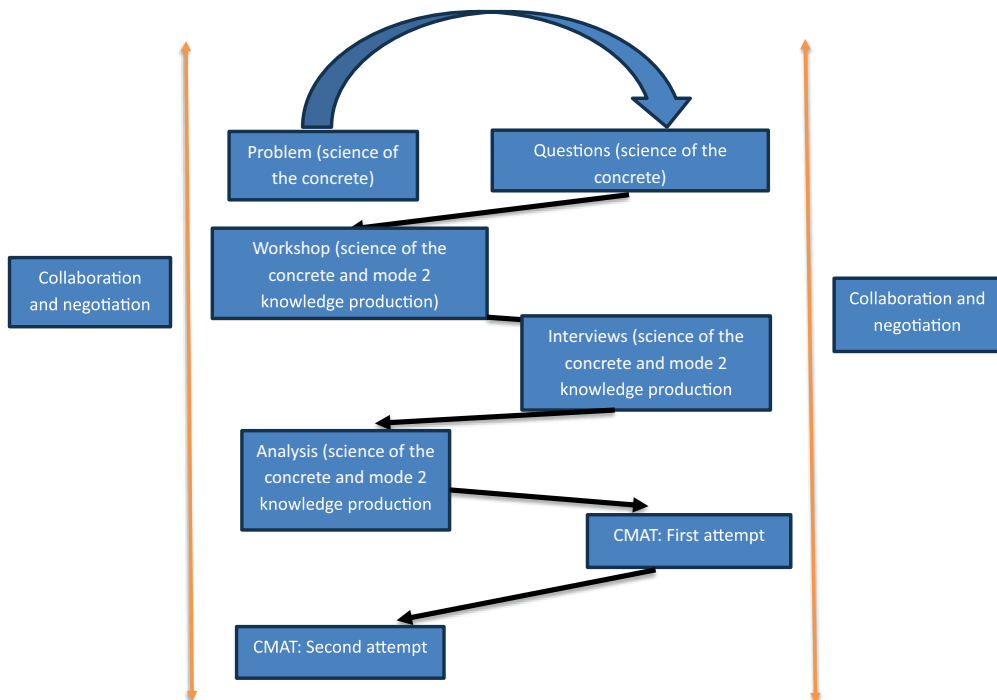


Figure 3. The practice research approach.

stakeholders in social work practice. Practice research should as much as possible involve the relevant stakeholders. The approach described here still enables us to reflect on the potential of the methodology.

The practice research approach adapted for this project included definition or identification of the problems, questions, workshop, interviews, analysis and CMAT: first attempt and CMAT: second attempt. While the Figure represents a linear engagement, it is important to recognise that the whole process was iterative, defined through collaboration and negotiation which are embedded throughout the process. We have made an attempt in the next paragraphs to clearly delineate areas of collaboration and negotiation, albeit we believe this to be embedded in the research. Collaboration and negotiation are integral to practice research methodology as it is through this mechanism that knowledge produced is likely to be relevant to practice (Runesson Kempe, 2019). The relevance is not only limited to practitioners alone but extends to service users (Julkunen & Uggerhøj, 2016; Uggerhøj, 2011), although service users have not been a focus here. It is important to mention that service user perspectives are useful in practice research. However, factors such as research goals, context and funding determine the stakeholders involved.

Problems in practice led to the research questions, calling for the need to collaborate with practitioner-researchers. While the problem was thought of by the researchers through their previous work on child maintenance in Ghana, there were discussions (negotiations) with the practitioner-researchers to validate the problem. It was evident that an assessment tool for child maintenance cases is needed by social workers in Ghana to streamline casework in this area. Validation from practitioner-researchers about the relevance and recognition of this as a 'problem' was the first step to meeting the needs of beneficiaries. The practitioner-led workshop was a central part of the collaboration and negotiation with stakeholders. The workshop was a stage where practice became the leader of the research process. This was about taking control of one's 'turf'. The handling of child maintenance cases belonged to the practitioners and so does assessment tools which are used by them. In the workshop, the practitioners used cases they have worked with to think through potential areas of interests for an assessment tool. Of course, this does not mean collaboration and negotiation was absent during the workshop. The workshop existed because of the preceding problem definition and research questions that were defined through negotiations.

Again, like the workshops, the interviews were conducted by the practitioner-researchers following a collaborative process to decide on a set of questions. The negotiations involved in the development of interview questions ensured that neither research nor practice was the dominant force. However, the practitioner-researchers had the room to exercise control and decision-making about what follow-up questions to ask. This was an opportunity for practitioner-researchers to collect data from practitioners that was relevant to a topic with which they have a professional experience. The approach here further emphasises a Mode 2 knowledge production stance where the goal is to generate knowledge that is application-oriented. The academics could have conducted the interviews but the questions asked in the process may not have focused on issues that mattered in practice. The nature of negotiations ensured that the practitioner-researchers got back to the researchers to discuss insights emerging and think about new questions to ask in further interviews.

The final three stages in the visual figure are the analysis, the development of the CMAT in first and second attempts, further shaped through collaboration and negotiation. Throughout these stages, practitioners and researchers have been sharing ideas and working together to lead to the development of the CMAT. As already stated, analysis of data from the workshops and interviews were conducted by the researchers. Again, this has to do with partners taking control of a turf. The academic researchers felt they were more adept at analysing the data than the practitioners based on their years of training in data analysis. Nonetheless, there were discussions with the practitioner-researchers following the analysis which led to co-producing the CMAT. ‘Collaboration’ and ‘negotiation’ have been written on both sides of the figure to demonstrate how instrumental they were throughout our practice research process. Overall, the project was a meeting point between research and practice, with mutually beneficial discussions along the lines. The goal of the project was to develop a tool that would meet a pressing need. The research team will be reporting on findings from social workers about the acceptability and appropriateness of the CMAT elsewhere. Initial data collected shows that the CMAT is easy to use and saves social workers’ time. While the CMAT is still at an embryonic stage, the use of practice research has the potential to increase the uptake of research results.

The CMAT is unique as it is the only tool in Ghana designed to assess child maintenance cases compared to the SOP which is more suitable for general casework. It also differs from related instruments in other countries. In most countries, child maintenance assessment exclusively focuses on deciding the amount to be paid to the resident parent (Hakovirta et al., 2022); hence, tools emphasise the income and employment standing of the payer (non-resident parent). The UK’s Child Maintenance Service is an example of this model. However, research has found an interplay of child protection concerns among families with child maintenance cases (Abdullah et al., 2024). Therefore, assessment tools for these families should address concerns related to child protection. Our CMAT takes cognisance of factors that could raise child protection issues with these families.

Challenges and opportunities

Research approaches involving partnerships of this nature do not come without challenges. The challenges we reflect on are based on experiences from our practice research project. While these may be common to practice research approaches in general, they also reflect our own experience with the process. A major hurdle is financial and time constraints. Practice research is capital and labour intensive. We think that the costly nature of this approach is a natural consequence of the enormous work required to engage with stakeholders in practice. The project was funded by University of Essex’s International Impact Fund which ensured the required financial support was available to carry out knowledge exchange activities and involve practitioner-researchers for a period of time. Practitioners have their own practice and it would have been impossible to engage them in the nature of work required without financial compensation. Funding is also required for academics and researchers to take time off teaching to focus on partnership activities with stakeholders. Practice research involves iterative processes

which requires time as researchers and practitioners discuss and negotiate their contributions to the project.

The horizontal network of collaboration between practice and research demands both parties to take their time to develop a sense of the interests and priorities of the other. Therefore, we advise partners to dedicate adequate time to their practice research projects. While funding for our project was from September 2023 to July 2024, the project team is still working on follow-up activities and will seek other funding to continue the project. As can be seen, practice research is expensive, time-consuming and questions may be raised about whether it is a worthwhile project. Hence, researchers may turn away from this kind of work. Practitioners themselves may have difficulties engaging with it due to the time commitments required. But the quality of engagements and knowledge produced from such research makes up for the financial and time commitments. We have received anecdotal evidence that some social workers have already begun using the CMAT in their practice and this is because they fed into its development.

Decision-making is also a tricky affair in practice research. Negotiations are central to practice research where neither practice nor research must completely give up their interests (Uggerhøj, 2014). Our observation is that, partners involved in the process naturally have the final say in areas of their expertise. Therefore, while decision-making is shared, there appears to be an unwritten code of practice where control is taken by a partner based on expertise. This is not to say that there is no collaboration involved as this will undermine the essence of negotiation and collaboration. However, while collaboration and partnership serve as the framework that undergirds this approach, there is a final decision-making partner depending on what activity is being conducted or the stage in the research process. For example, although the workshop for this project came as a result of collaborative decisions between the researchers and practitioners, the programme itself was organised and led by practitioners. This was because the workshop focused on a part of social work practice which the practitioner-researchers were familiar with. Practice research should be carried out in a way where each partner's expertise is protected for research findings to be beneficial to communities with which they are meant for.

In practice research, there is a risk of deciding on the outcome before the intervention (Simpson, 2020). The practitioner-researchers worked closely with the phenomenon we investigated. Hence, there was the risk that they came to conclusions with what we planned to achieve. The idea to co-produce the tool was well-received by the practitioner-researchers and frontline practitioners expected to work with it. As a result of this, discussions with these partners can sometimes feel as restating the obvious. On the one hand this is a good thing; it implies that our research is doing something relevant and as close to practice as possible. On the other hand, the feeling of familiarity among the practitioners could be in the way of challenging existing dogmas. However, it is important to argue that negotiation and collaboration between all partners involved could ensure that, whether the project is repeating existing practices or developing something new, the outcome is to produce knowledge relevant to practice. Even when existing services or practices are being repeated as an outcome of practice research, we have found that there is always a new perspective

that is offered. Unlike traditional research approach, practice research takes a bottom-up approach to knowledge creation. The commitment to bottom-up knowledge production and partnerships should take precedence over the novelty of what is produced. Of course, we are not arguing that novelty is frowned upon within practice research. However, it is an incidental part of the collaboration and negotiations that characterise practice research itself.

Conclusions

Throughout this article, we have demonstrated the collaboration and negotiation processes involved in our practice research project. We have shown different activities involved in the research leading to the development of the CMAT. Both research and practice came together to share their learning and experiences to develop the tool, with neither research nor practice completely giving up their interests. The approach we have described has wider implications to disciplines in social sciences where an aim is to improve the wellbeing of individual, groups and communities, with active involvement of practitioners in the research process. For early career researchers and experienced researchers not familiar with this approach, we hope our description in this article provides them with the requisite toolkit to take on their own practice research project.

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Author contributions

CRedit: **Ebenezer Cudjoe**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Kwabena Frimpong-Manso**: Funding acquisition, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Alhassan Abdullah**: Funding acquisition, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Abena Dufie Akonu-Atta**: Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Yvonne Appiah**: Data curation, Writing – review & editing.

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