Equity through interventions?

- Tracing the possibilities and challenges of a project model

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In 2006, the Danish government launched a programme entitled "Equal opportunities for all children" and a target that 95% of Danish pupils will be attending a course of further education by 2015.

This paper provides an example of how the challenge of equity in education could be taken up locally, using a combination of development and evaluation methods with focus on supporting teacher learning and generating knowledge.

The paper presents a project being carried out by the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) in collaboration with a school district in the suburbs of Copenhagen. The project deals with how the patterns that produce and reproduce inequality of opportunity, especially the link between social background and educational achievement, could be rearranged and broken.

The study involves evaluators working in partnership with practitioners to better understand the processes involved in educational equity and to seek practical solutions within the complex local context.

The project has also been presented in the network "Inclusive education" at the ECER conferences in Vienna 2009 and Helsinki 2010. Papers can be downloaded at www.eva.dk/projekter/2009/indsatser-mod-negativ-social-arv.

Learning supported by evaluation
The aim of the project method is to support teacher learning by infusing evaluative thinking and informing ongoing development. [1]

The learning process is based on a **program theory** developed for intervention.

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[1] This approach is inspired by developmental evaluation as presented by Michael Quinn Patton (2008 and 2010)

In this case, creating a program theory means identifying chains of causes and effects that represent how certain activities and methods combined in an intervention can be expected to lead to certain desired outcomes. Each part of the causal chain is associated with a set of indicators.
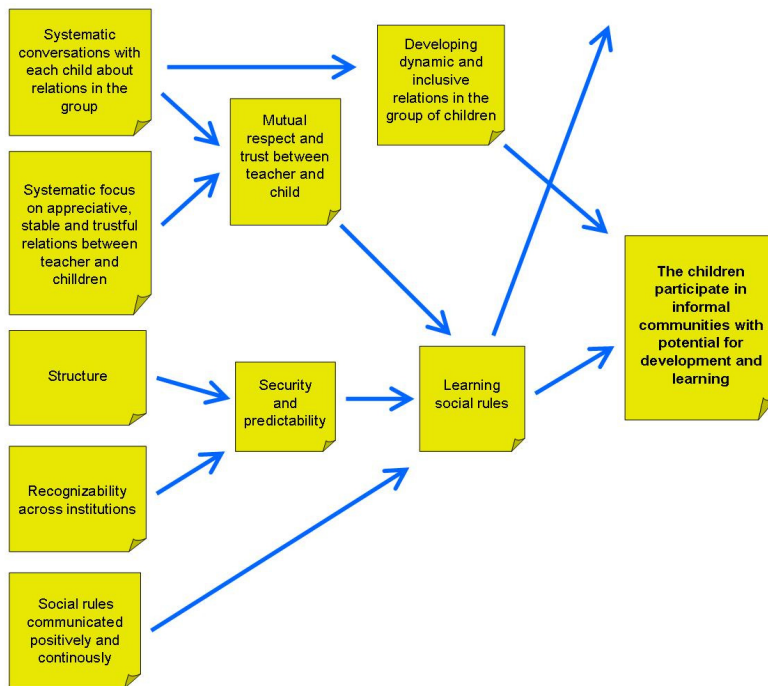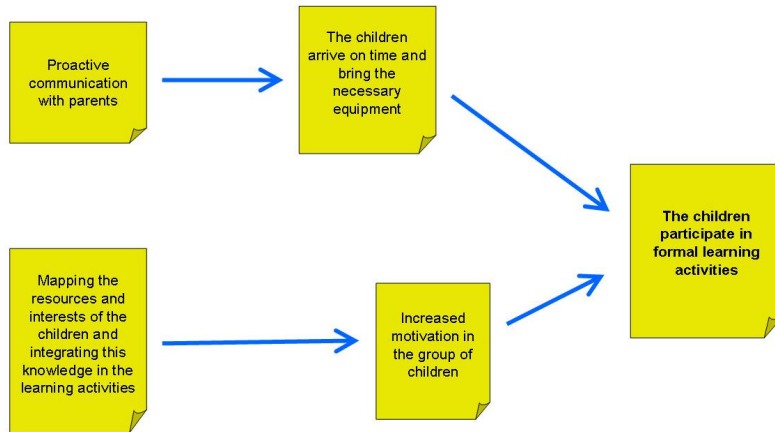
The program theory represents a series of assumptions about how the chosen interventions will affect children's learning opportunities from both long term and more intermediate perspectives. The assumptions are explicated in a joint process of dialogue between the program staff, the evaluators and researchers and are, therefore, partly based on the experiences of the program staff and their knowledge of the institutions, the children and families in the neighbourhood, and partly on research-based knowledge.

The focus of the evaluation is to test the assumptions in the program theory and to reflect on the correlation between the expected outcome and the actual effect of the intervention, and to perhaps adjust the intervention and/or the assumptions in response to the experiences gained. This process is supported by collected data concerning the intervention and its effect.

The program theory of the project

The program theory of the project is illustrated as a flow chart showing the idea of the project in terms of causal relations. The causal relations represent partly the program staff's assumptions about the effect of the intervention and partly the purpose of the intervention. In other words, the program theory is an ideal model of the intervention fulfilling its purpose. This purpose or positive expectation contained in the program theory is the outset for developing the intervention and learning from it through reflection and reality testing. The term reality testing is understood as being a set of analysed data about the intervention and its effects, which enhances reflection on the intervention and the need for adjustment or development. The reality testing also serves the purpose of communicating the experiences of this particular intervention to a broader audience.

The model below shows the program theory developed for the intervention.

Proactive communication with parents → The children arrive on time and bring the necessary equipment → The children participate in formal learning activities

Mapping the resources and interests of the children and integrating this knowledge in the learning activities → Increased motivation in the group of children → The children participate in formal learning activities

Systematic conversations with each child about relations in the group → Developing dynamic and inclusive relations in the group of children

Systematic conversations with each child about relations in the group → Mutual respect and trust between teacher and child

Systematic focus on appreciative, stable and trustful relations between teacher and chilldren → Mutual respect and trust between teacher and child

Structure → Security and predictability → Learning social rules

Recognizability across institutions → Security and predictability

Social rules communicated positively and continously → Learning social rules

Mutual respect and trust between teacher and child → Learning social rules

Developing dynamic and inclusive relations in the group of children → The children participate in informal communities with potential for development and learning

Learning social rules → The children participate in informal communities with potential for development and learning

The assumptions contained in the program theory are developed through a process of identifying the desired long term outcome of the project and working out what is currently needed to reach this point.

In brief terms, the program theory argues that to make children participate in formal communities of learning, the obstacles of not meeting on time and not bringing the necessary equipment need to be ruled out by informing parents in a way that is consciously adapted to them. Secondly, the children need to be motivated for learning activities through systematic attention directed towards their resources and interests.

Along with the focus on formal learning, participation in informal communities of learning is emphasized as an important element in being a part of the institutional life. To profit from the informal communities, it is necessary to develop relations and learn social rules. These requirements are provided for through systematic dialogues about relations in the group and through creating a safe environment for learning social rules based on structure, recognisability and a positive relation between teacher and child.

These assumptions about how to support participation in formal and informal communities of learning create the basis for the intervention and the learning process.

Activities and roles
The project consists of four types of activities listed in the scheme below. The development of the program theory and the concretization of actions took place at the beginning of the project, and the other three types of activities (the data collection, reporting and evaluation) took place five times during the project period as a connected set of activities.

Type	Activity
Development	Development of the program theory
	Concretization of actions
Data collection	Interview
	Short monthly interview
	Observations
Reporting	Reporting
Evaluation	Reflection events
	Meetings with the administrative level

The listed activities implied different roles: one as a developer (facilitating development), and one as an evaluator (evaluating the intervention). These roles were combined in different ways in the different activities, as illustrated in the following scheme. The scheme shows how the focus on development and evaluation was combined in each of the activities, and how the two roles were weighted by the consultant.

Scheme: The role and focus of the consultants in different project activities

Project activity	Primary role	Focus on development	Focus on evaluation
Development of the program theory	Developer	Open and dynamic processes Time for shaping the assumptions Focus on ownership Recognizing the perspectives of the participants Challenging by interpreting and systemizing and by presenting the perspectives of researchers	Formulating the idea of the project as a line of causality Formulating indicators
Concretization of actions	Developer	Local interpretation of the program theory (in the three participating institutions) Taking outset in local possibilities The actions have to make sense to the people carrying them out The actions must be new	Precise descriptions Weighting of systematics Correlation between action and program theory Concretizising the different parts of the program theory separately
Interview	Evaluator	-	-
Short monthly interviews	Evaluator	Supporting the implementation by questioning systematically the different parts of the program Ongoing reflection on the actions	Increased validity by focusing on a recent period
Observations	Evaluator	Dialogues with the program staff	Focus on indicators Knowledge about context
Reporting	Evaluator	Awareness on communicating in a motivating way Communicating positive effects – large and small Recognition of the program as a process of development	Reports are structured by the program theory Focus on the relation between the intention and the actual implementation and effect Assessment of the implementation and effect Publication
Reflection events	Developer	Reflection on themes from report Identifying areas of development	Presentation of report
Meetings with the administrative level	Developer	Discussing the role of the administrative level Discussing relations between the program and other initia-	Presentation of report

		tives/projects and overall strategies of the municipality.	

As the above scheme illustrates, the project activities are characterised by a parallel focus on development and evaluation with a weighting of these two focuses according to the different purposes of the activities.

In the preliminary phase, the purpose of the activities is to develop a program theory and an intervention suitable for evaluation through a process of exchanging different perspectives and interpreting the idea of the project. In this phase, the development focus is dominant. By collecting data and reporting findings throughout the project period, the purpose is to document the implementation and effect of the intervention and enhance teacher learning. In these activities the evaluation focus is dominant in the collection of data and reporting of findings, while the development focus is dominant in the activities for reflecting on findings.

The benefits and challenges of combining the two roles

The combination of the roles of assisting in developing the intervention and evaluating it implies both pros and cons, which should be addressed by the consultant.

The following two lists present a set of benefits and challenges based on the experiences from the project. These lists could be consulted when considering using a combined development and evaluation design, and if this design is chosen, particularly in the preparation of the activities.

The benefits of the combined roles are:

- The consultants gain important knowledge of the intervention that is to be evaluated and insight into the assumptions behind the intervention.
- The thorough knowledge of the intervention and the assumptions makes it easier to transform the analysis of data into reflection points that are relevant for the ongoing development of the intervention.
- The project staff and the consultants build up trust through their cooperation in developing the intervention, and this can be helpful when collecting data for the evaluation of the intervention.
- The focus on making the intervention suitable for evaluation can make the development process more focused and the description of the intervention more precise.

The challenges of the combined roles are:

- The project staff may experience the evaluating approach in the reports as inconsistent with the appreciative approach that characterises the development activities.
- The project staff may feel that the consultants are opting out of the shared ownership of the intervention when evaluating it.
- It can be a challenge for the consultants to adequately distance themselves from the intervention in order to evaluate it.

How can evaluation develop practice?

The project model is based on the idea that evaluation can develop practice by offering data about the intervention. By collecting data and reporting findings several times during the project period, evaluation becomes a way of structuring a cycle of action and reflection[2] to enhance ongoing development of the intervention. In evaluating this idea, the evaluators discovered that it was not so much the reporting of findings that contained the potential for learning, but rather the dialogues with the program staff based on the evaluators' identification of relevant themes.

Another idea behind the project is that evaluation can develop practice by building capacity for evaluative thinking. Building capacity for evaluative thinking in this project implies that the teachers are given the opportunity of hands on experience with a specific model for evaluation – program theory – as well as an opportunity for more profound learning about changing practice systematically. Hanne Foss Hansen (2003)[3] suggests that evaluations can be focused on legitimacy by choosing methods to match the cultural repertoire in the organizational context OR be focused on change by challenging this repertoire. In this project, the evaluators discovered that the evaluative thinking of the project – i.e. systematically implementing observable changes, testing assumptions and consequently referring to the program theory – to be a challenge for the program staff and clearly not a part of the cultural repertoire of the institutions. Making sense of the intervention seemed for the program staff to be associated with more open categories and room for interpretation. This required flexibility and adaptation of the evaluative approach in the context to make it serve the purpose of developing practice.

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[2] Argyris and Schön (1978)
[3] Hansen (2003), p. 52

References

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