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Equity through interventions?

- Tracing the implementation of an equitable schooling initiative

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Background

In 2006 the Danish government launched a programme entitled "Equal opportunities for all children" with the aim of bridging a widening national educational gap, a gap also identified and highlighted by PISA. One government target is to ensure that 95% of Danish pupils will be attending a course of further education by 2015.

This is a very ambitious goal and, according to several Danish researchers, a difficult one to attain. While we are becoming steadily better at identifying and explaining factors that lead to social and educational inequity, we still know very little about successful intervention. What works for whom? In which contexts does it work? How does it work? Why does it work? And how can we benefit nationally and internationally from a local study of what makes a specific mechanism successful for a particular group of children?

Our paper addresses some of these questions with the point of departure in a project being carried out in collaboration with a school district in the suburbs of Copenhagen.

The project

The project deals with how the patterns that reproduce and produce inequality of opportunity, and especially the link between social background and educational achievement, could be rearranged and broken. The intention is to develop methods and strategies in cooperation between The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) and a school district in the suburbs of Copenhagen. The program staff consist of teachers from a local kindergarten, a local school and a school-based leisure-time activities facility, as well as representatives of the administration.
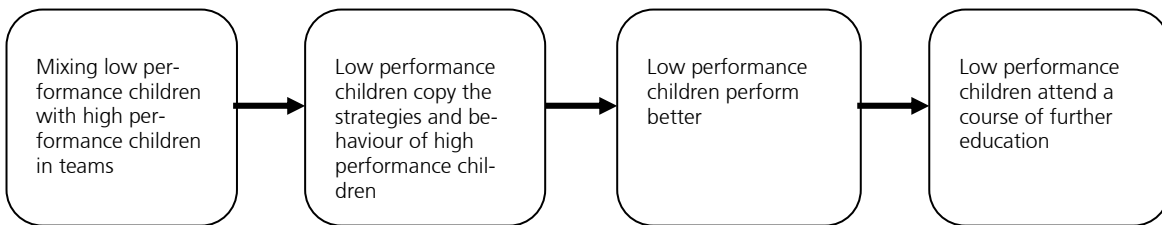
The program staff was composed on the assumption that early intervention[1] across institutions would be an effective way to achieve results regarding equity in education. The project design was inspired by The Centre for Equity in Education, University of Manchester, where researchers have been working to unify various resources in local communities to create shared strategies to deal with the educational achievements of children at risk of marginalisation and under-achievement.

The project aims to develop and evaluate both intervention and the method of the project. The intervention intended to create more equal opportunities among children is being designed as part of the project and will subsequently be evaluated. The evaluation will be structured around a program theory for the intervention – a series of assumptions about how the intervention will affect children's opportunities in both the short and the long term. However, the project will only follow children from about five to seven years of age.

Program theory as the pivotal point of a learning process
The development and evaluation of the intervention begins with a program theory created in a dialogue between us as evaluators and program staff. Creating a program theory means identifying chains of cause and effect that represent how certain activities and methods combined in an intervention can be expected to lead to certain desired outcomes.

For example:

| Mixing low performance children with high performance children in teams | → | Low performance children copy the strategies and behaviour of high performance children | → | Low performance children perform better | → | Low performance children attend a course of further education |

Evaluating a program theory involves monitoring the program and collecting data to determine whether the program works as expected and explaining discrepancies between the theory and what actually happened (if there are discrepancies). This could – in the case of this project – lead to the theory being adjusted and/or new activities and methods being introduced over time.

The evaluation process focuses on reality testing and learning. The program staff will test their own assumptions through a process of reflection in action

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[1] Recent studies identify low income and low maternal education as the factors most strongly associated with poorer cognitive, socio-emotional and health outcomes among very young children, as young as nine months. See www.childtrends.org.

(equipped in their daily setting with indicators to observe the effects of their own actions) and reflection on action (taking part in remote data analysis).

The challenge for us as evaluators will be to maintain a "scientific" approach by testing the program theory as though in an "experimental setting", controlling certain aspects of the environment through the actions of the program staff and looking at what is going on from the outside through the "scientific microscope". At the same time we must be able to maintain a symmetrical dialogue in discussing the perspectives of the program staff in order to initiate negotiations about changes. Thereby we control aspects of the environment in new ways that are expected to lead to better outcomes for the children.

A realistic approach to evaluation

The evaluation of the program theory is inspired by the concepts and approaches of realistic evaluation developed by Pawson and Tilley.

Being "realistic" means believing it is possible to conduct research into and learn from social policies, programs and initiatives in order to modify and improve their effectiveness, but at the same time acknowledging that there is no universal truth and therefore no universal recommendations for human action in the broadest sense (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, p. xii).

The realistic approach focuses systematically and carefully on interrelated concepts of *context*, *mechanism* and *outcome* in the evaluation of programs.

"Programs work (have successful outcomes) only in so far as they introduce the appropriate ideas and opportunities (mechanisms) to groups in the appropriate social and cultural conditions (contexts)." (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, p. 57).

The *mechanism* explains causal relations by answering the question: What is it that makes this specific action result in this specific outcome in this specific context?

"It is through the notion of program *mechanisms* that we take the step from asking whether a program works to understanding *what it is about a program* which makes it work [...] Identifying mechanisms involves the attempt to develop propositions about what it is within the program that triggers a reaction from its subjects." (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, p. 66).

The explanatory mechanisms can be identified at the level of both micro and macro social processes. A realistic approach implies paying attention to a broader range of social processes in which all human action is embedded (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, p. 64-65). As noted in the presentation of this symposium an institution is embedded in local, regional, national and international networks that are interwoven into social, political and economic structures. These

interwoven networks have an influence on the processes and outcome of a program.

The different roles in the project
We, the evaluators, and the program staff have shared responsibility and overlapping roles in developing and evaluating methods and strategies. We facilitate a process with the program staff in designing the intervention. The experience and ideas of the program staff will be translated into an intervention. We will challenge their ideas to make sure that the intervention is ambitious and at the same time realistic. During the intervention phase of the project the program staff will be responsible for documenting their work with the intervention while we will provide the framework for this documentation, conduct interviews and make observations along the way. We are also responsible for arranging opportunities for the program staff to meet and discuss their work with the intervention and to identify the factors that further or prevent the intervention having the expected effect on the children. These meetings also form part of the collection of documentation for the evaluation and can play a role in disseminating experience with the implementation of the intervention.

We collaborate with a team of experts representing research on interventions as well as implementation and development processes on the practice level. At this point the job of the experts is to qualify the perspectives of the program staff in creating the program theory, which means analysing their perspectives and introducing research and experience-based knowledge that supports, balances, broadens or even questions the perspectives of the program staff.

What have we done in the project so far?
On the basis of meetings with representatives from the practical level and the administrative level we drew up a set of shared basic assumptions about inequality of opportunity and methods of working with it. These basic assumptions represent the results of the dialogue between the program staff and us as evaluators. We did not work as neutral facilitators but took part in a process of exchanging knowledge, experiences, opinions and perspectives.

The shared basic assumptions provide the foundation for creating the program theory, which is still in progress at this stage of the project.

The next steps are to finalise the program theory (which includes setting up ways to evaluate it), to carry out the intervention (and the ongoing collection of – predominantly qualitative – data for the evaluation), to examine the program theory and finally to communicate the results of the evaluation and initiate further use.

Knowledge

How can we benefit nationally and internationally from a local study of what makes a specific mechanism successful for a particular group of children?

Our answer is that while we cannot offer evidence for the effectiveness of a program in all contexts, we can offer good descriptions of the context of our evaluation particularly with regard to those context factors which have an influence on a program. This offers other people the opportunity to make comparisons with their own contexts and judge and reinterpret the knowledge so that it becomes relevant for them: "Before we copy the program we should be aware of certain differences in context. What changes in the program are needed to match our context? How can we promote some of the supporting mechanisms identified – or avoid some of the pitfalls – in our implementation of an intervention?"

Descriptions of children, professionals, institutions and communities should be based on concepts and categories that are not bound to a context. Shared concepts and categories make it possible for others to make knowledge-based decisions on a program by analysing similarities and differences between the contexts. The description of a different context, program and outcomes thus constitutes a structure for the description of one's own context, the characteristics of one's own program and the desired (and, on the basis of the analysis, plausible) outcomes.

From our point of view communicating what we know (with certainty) in describing context factors and factors which further and prevent the implementation of an intervention is better than drawing general conclusions with reservations.

Reference

Pawson, Ray and Tilley, Nick: *Realistic Evaluation*, SAGE Publications, London (1997).