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Rikke Sørup (rs@eva.dk)
Katja Munch Thorsen (kmt@eva.dk)
The Danish Evaluation Institute

From knowledge production to sustainable practice - presentation of tools for internal quality assurance

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Alice to the Cheshire Cat:

> *'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'*
>
> *'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.*
>
> *'I don't much care where--' said Alice.*
>
> *'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.*
>
> *'--so long as I get somewhere,' Alice added as an explanation.*
>
> *'Oh, you're sure to do that,' said the Cat, `If you only walk long enough.'*

Lewis Caroll, 1865

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Abstract

Educational evaluation is conducted very differently around the world. Most methods, though, do share common characteristics, foremost a base somewhere between policy making and practice.

The Danish National Evaluation Institute (EVA) has since 1999 been obliged by law to explore and develop the quality of schools. We try through all our activities to meet the policymakers' need for knowledge. This need is twofold: firstly they want to know what is efficient, e.g. which measures are necessary from a national perspective to improve school effectiveness? Secondly they want to know if they are getting value for money, e.g. does the individual school or local authority perform adequately? To answer these questions, the Institute draws on experiences from both a traditional quality assurance discourse and on sociological research methods.

But how can we ensure that the practitioners also benefit from our results? Traditionally it has been assumed that involving the users in evaluation processes would automatically lead to development and improvement. And this assumption isn't necessarily wrong. But how can we ensure that knowledge and experience are also spread to other institutions or schools, and to other practitioners?

Lately, EVA has focused strongly on developing tools and materials suitable for supporting schools and local authorities in their internal and ongoing quality assurance. Danish schools are obliged by law to conduct various kinds of internal quality assurance, and experience shows that it is extremely difficult to make the connection between internal quality work and daily praxis. EVA's tools are intended to help schools to work systematically with quality assurance and to close the gap between evaluation and improvement of practice.

This paper elaborates on descriptions of quality assurance and quality development, and it presents the thoughts behind two different tools developed for the fields of primary and lower secondary education, and upper secondary education.
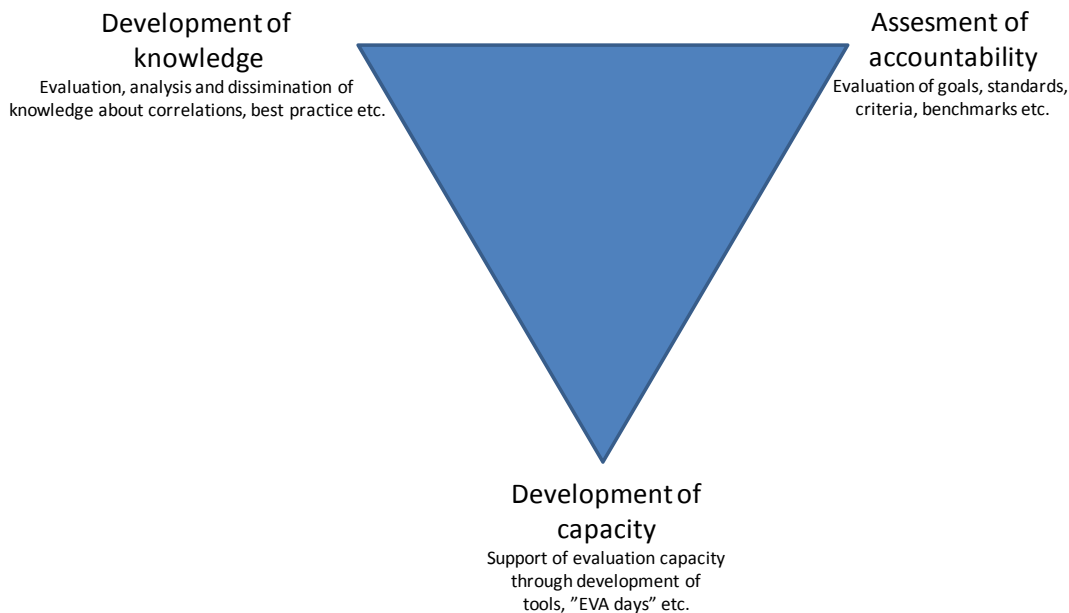
Approaching quality assurance

EVA has since 1999 been obliged by law to explore the quality of schools. The Act provided the framework for this activity. The framework clearly integrated elements from two discourses. On the one hand, it drew upon a traditional quality assurance approach, which was seen in the mandatory use of self-evaluation, peer review, the formulation of recommendations and, to a certain extent, the formulation of criteria. On the other hand, it drew upon the methodology of sociological research by the optional use of surveys, case studies and statistical data, by the publication of reports with cases that were to some extent anonymous, and by the use of hypotheses. Recently, we have seen a tendency – partly reflected in some changes to the Act – towards a (re)polarization of these two approaches.

At the same time, EVA is committed to the development of quality in schools. From a long term perspective, we do of course believe that EVA's recommendations to policy makers result in quality development at schools, but, furthermore, our activities have reflected the assumption that the combination of the two approaches would more directly and immediately lead to development at the schools involved in the evaluation processes. This assumption may be correct, but we have also realized that this development possibility was not automatically transferred to other schools, and hence we have realized the need for specific activities to support schools in

building up evaluation capacity. The polarization of approaches described above is illustrated by diagram 1.

Diagram 1: Three approaches to quality

Development of
knowledge
Evaluation, analysis and dissimination of
knowledge about correlations, best practice etc.

Assesment of
accountability
Evaluation of goals, standards,
criteria, benchmarks etc.

Development of
capacity
Support of evaluation capacity
through development of
tools, "EVA days" etc.

The triangle shows the three approaches and their internal connections. It is EVA's position that all three approaches are necessary. Some activities still combine them; some more clearly express one approach or the other. Following the textbox below, two projects that definitely reflect the capacity-developing approach are presented.

Three approaches to quality

Quality through assesment of accountability
An important fundament to developing quality is to know where you are. Does a school fulfill a required norm or expectation? This could be a norm in the form of criteria for accreditation or an accountable goal. Focusing on accountability can help secure a certain level of quality. It can also facilitate a debate about, and generate a common understanding of what quality is. Last but not least, the focus on accountability can support schools in a reflection process centered on local targets and strategies, and can help compare performance levels and expectations with other institutions.

Quality through development of knowledge
To assure and develop quality, it is necessary to maintain a focus on developing knowledge by mapping, analyzing and disseminating it. It can be knowledge about how different areas organize the pedagogical work; knowledge about what tools to apply under certain conditions; sharing of best practice or inspiration from different contexts; or it can be general knowledge about pupils'/students' backgrounds, conditions and opportunities to complete an education; how different educational systems are organized; what knowledge and competence teachers, managers and municipalities need, etc.

Development of knowledge and knowledge sharing support the development of quality based on documented information. We acquire knowledge about what the basis for a good school is, and how there are different ways to develop and assure quality. But general knowledge is not easy to transfer into action without support. To convert other people's experiences, general knowledge and good ideas into actions demands special abilities.

Quality through development of capacity
Evaluation capacity is the ability to systematically reflect on local practice and efficiently act on relevant knowledge – and to know what the goal is. When evaluation "capacity" is used, it is to clarify that development of quality requires not only the competence to develop, use and translate knowledge, but also organizational resources to work systematically with the development of quality.

Evaluation competence is about the ability to develop knowledge systematically and reflect on how knowledge created in other contexts can be developed in a new application. This requires the organization to have a clear idea about its status and its goal. Thus evaluation competence does also include the organization's ability to develop and implement strategic goals.

Primary and lower secondary level

The area of primary and lower secondary education includes the majority of educational institutions in Denmark; that is approximately 2,100 institutions, most of which are public schools. Only public schools and institutions, and municipal councils are obliged to participate in EVA's evaluations.

In 2007, EVA's right of initiative in the area of primary and lower secondary education was transferred to the presidency of the Council for Primary and Lower Secondary Education (Skolerådet). The Council's focus has very strongly been to find out what is efficient on a national level, and hence the evaluations that have been commissioned by the Council are large-scale, making more pronounced use of quantitative methods such as surveys, statistical data, etc.

At the same time, the government and other parties have focused on quality assurance and the creation of evaluation cultures in primary and lower secondary education. As an example, the municipalities are required to work out quality reports on schools' efforts within a range of central themes. According to the Act, EVA is supposed to support the development of local competences within evaluation and to foster a local evaluation culture. As this does not automatically happen through the large scale evaluations commissioned by the Council, EVA launched in 2009 the concept of "EVA days", where municipalities and others discuss evaluation and quality issues with EVA.

EVA days

EVA offers all local authorities (98 "kommuner") one day of consultation with two EVA employees in order to support the development of internal quality assurance. The concept was inspired by EVA's department for early childhood education, where a large number of EVA days were conducted in 2008. The content on the other hand was based on EVA's own projects within in the field of primary and lower secondary education. In order to keep expenses down, i.e. reach a greater number of municipalities within the same budget, it was decided to develop EVA days around four specific themes:

- quality reports;
- ICT in schools;
- student plans;
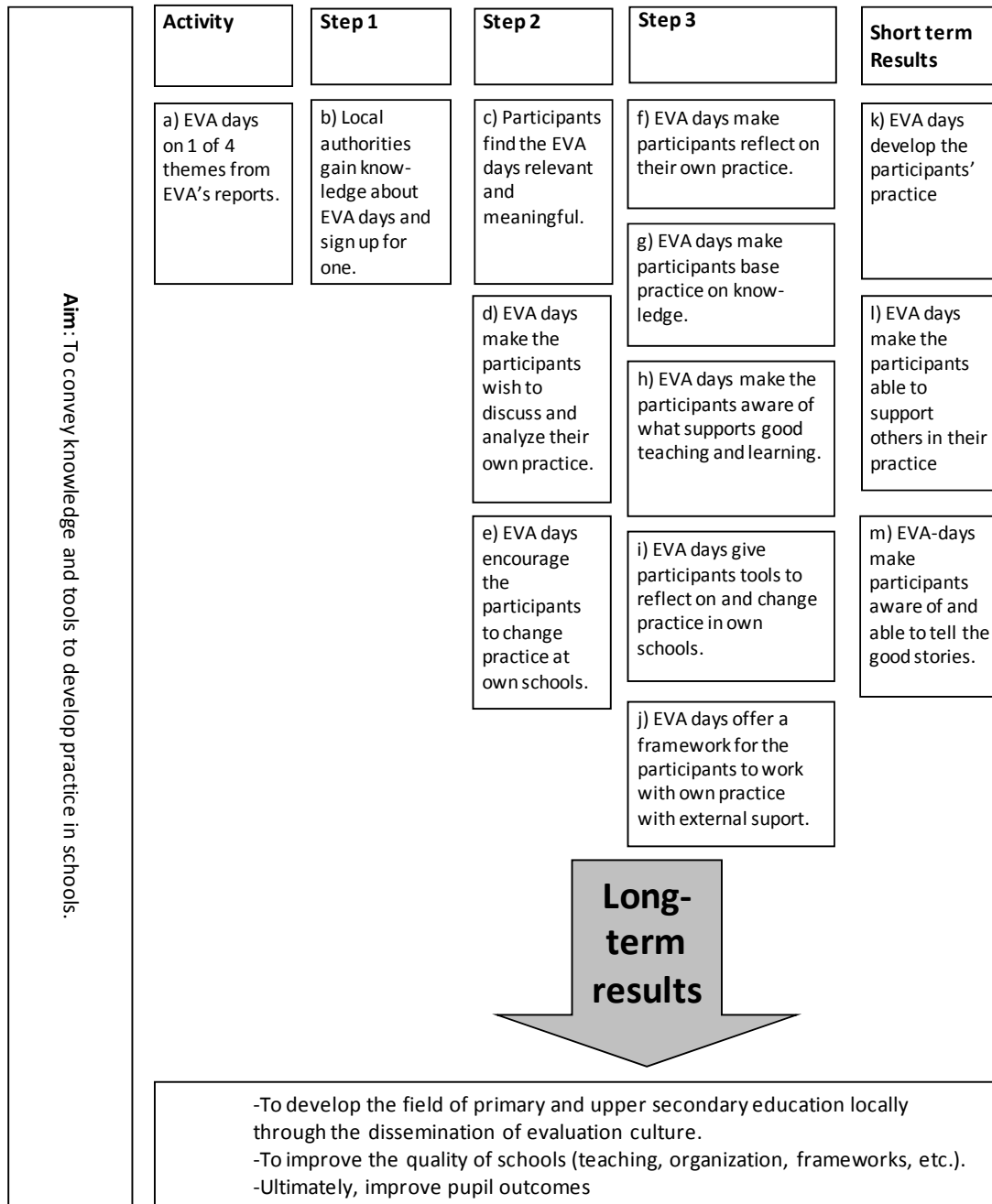- teaching of bilingual pupils.

Until now, EVA days have been conducted within the themes of quality reports and ICT, and in both cases the basis has been to adapt the theme to common knowledge about evaluation methods which EVA has gained through its work in the field and through evaluation literature. And for a long time, EVA has conveyed this knowledge through numerous presentations, seminars and conferences. The original thoughts behind this set up and its possible impacts are reflected in diagram 2 below.

As the diagram shows, the participants ought to be very active players in this desirable process. Hence an EVA day very much involves the participants in the work; i.e. the participants work with subjects related to their own practice, while the EVA employees work as facilitators. At the same time – and in order to keep the work on the right track and to ensure progress – the EVA employees also give minor presentations during the day. Themes of the presentations could be:

- objectives of teaching and learning;
- working with indicators;
- gathering and using different sources of documentation;
- translating evaluation results to new practice (and new objectives).

The challenge is to find – and not least to communicate – the right balance between presentations and the work of the participants. Experience indicates that, on one hand, evaluation theory can be very abstract, and participants are usually pleased to get help to relate it to their own practice. On the other hand, it can be frustrating for participants to experience that EVA does not have all the answers; as EVA does not know the local objectives and indicators. These are up to the participants to define.

Diagram 2: EVA days: expected processes and results

	Activity	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Short term Results
Aim: To convey knowledge and tools to develop practice in schools.	a) EVA days on 1 of 4 themes from EVA's reports.	b) Local authorities gain know-ledge about EVA days and sign up for one.	c) Participants find the EVA days relevant and meaningful.	f) EVA days make participants reflect on their own practice.	k) EVA days develop the participants' practice
			d) EVA days make the participants wish to discuss and analyze their own practice.	g) EVA days make participants base practice on know-ledge.	l) EVA days make the participants able to support others in their practice
				h) EVA days make the participants aware of what supports good teaching and learning.	
			e) EVA days encourage the participants to change practice at own schools.	i) EVA days give participants tools to reflect on and change practice in own schools.	m) EVA-days make participants aware of and able to tell the good stories.
				j) EVA days offer a framework for the participants to work with own practice with external suport.	

Long-term results

- To develop the field of primary and upper secondary education locally through the dissemination of evaluation culture.
- To improve the quality of schools (teaching, organization, frameworks, etc.).
- Ultimately, improve pupil outcomes

Another challenge is to adapt the "predefined" package of evaluation theory to a specific theme, flexibly enough to reach participants that are at very different stages regarding internal quality assurance and the development of an evaluation culture. Firstly, different municipalities can be at different stages; secondly different persons within a municipality can be at different stages regarding knowledge as well as experience. Thus the participants in one EVA day can be at different stages.

The local authority decides who should participate, and typically the participants are teachers, school heads and local authority employees. The maximum number of participants is 60. Hence, one aim of the EVA day is to make the participants from one municipality work together, to provide them with a common language and, if possible, to send them home with some kind of agreement on how to develop practice in their municipality and how to involve the different parties.

Upper secondary level

The area of upper secondary education in Denmark has a complex institutional structure comprising more than 350 institutions, where the major dividing line runs between vocational education and training and the different gymnasiums.

In 2005, an ambitious reform within upper secondary education took effect. Also, from 2005, following new quality regulations, it became a standard requirement of all institutions that they carry out systematic internal quality assurance. Whereas institutions providing vocational education had already for some time been legally obliged to assure systematic quality work, it was a new and challenging demand for the 150 gymnasiums that provide the three-year general upper secondary education leading to a national examination (stx). Therefore, EVA particularly targeted the tool described below to these schools.

Inspiration material for self-evaluation

Since 2007, the gymnasiums have been independent institutions. Hence, there is no local authority responsible for several institutions to which EVA could address the tool. Thus, the target group for the tool is the individual school. As EVA has no possibility of attending all schools, the tool must be self-explanatory, and because of the finances of the project, self-explanatory means written material.

To help us write the material, EVA appointed a group of four quality managers from three different schools. This group gave input to and commented on the draft material. Furthermore, the group committed themselves to testing the material in their own schools before publishing a final edition. The testing and subsequent publication will take place at the beginning of 2010.

Since 2007, various kinds of written material have already been published. According to the group, there are several problems with the use of these materials:
- Evaluation is an abstract theme, and even though teachers at gymnasiums are academically schooled, it is difficult for them to see how the abstract theme of evaluation can influence their individual practice. Hence, the materials do not succeed in reaching the teachers, and evaluation and quality work remain the responsibility of a few quality responsible teachers or managers.
- The materials often launch big systems that tend to peter out eventually. A lot of new documentation is gathered, often in the form of questionnaires among students, but it is not really being used. The lack of use may be due to a lack of connection with the school's overall strategy and goals.
- Some schools may find the material irrelevant, as the gymnasiums – as well as the primary schools – are at differing stages when it comes to the systematic conduct and application of self evaluation and quality systems.

With help from the group, EVA has tried to develop material that addresses these challenges. The material is specifically meant to be used on a "pedagogical day". All gymnasiums have a

number of these non-teaching days during a year, where all teachers work together on a pedagogical theme. The point is to involve all the teachers in the process in order to give them the necessary sense of ownership of the evaluation.

Furthermore, the material includes a number of exercises that ought to kick start the process in a positive way, e.g. considering together the focus of the self-evaluation, the (already existing) sources of documentation, the connection to school strategy and goals, the involvement of stakeholders and the follow-up plan. The material, which will be distributed to all 150 gymnasiums, has a disposition and form that allows the individual school to pick out those exercises that fit its actual need and level, and finally the exercises are published on the EVA website in an adaptable format.

Where to go – how and why?
Common to both projects – different as they are – is the purpose of helping the participants work systematically with evaluation and quality assurance. The point is to let them feel that evaluation is not only something they do because they have to, but also because it may be useful. The point is also to help them use the knowledge they already have in a smarter way, and to help them involve the right and necessary people in the evaluation processes so that evaluation becomes part of a common culture.

EVA uses different tools and different exercises developed to help schools work systematically. Most of them are somehow related to the quality circle (diagram):

Diagram 3: The quality circle
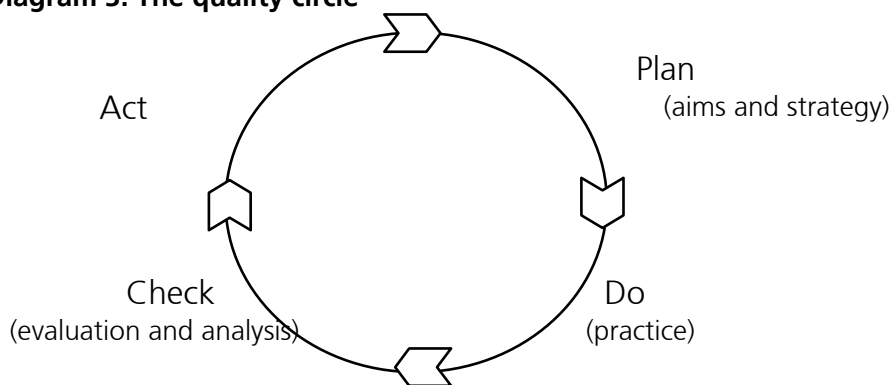
What EVA has seen in all its evaluations and projects so far is that activity to the right of the circle (plan and do) is very well represented indeed. A lot of good teaching, learning and initiatives occur in schools, but often it is non-knowledge based. During the strong focus on evaluation and evaluation culture of recent years, the next step ("Check") has also been well taken care of, but it still doesn't make much sense if the last quarter of the circle isn't completed.

It is EVA's hope that dissemination of the tools presented in this paper can help in positioning evaluation into a full context and, thereby, help to close the circle. Evaluation tools can thus, in addition to other tools, help to (re)define local directions and help schools and local authorities to stay on the right track. While it is still too early to evaluate the evaluation tools, our experience – so far non-knowledge-based – tells us that the tools can be helpful.