

## DEVELOPMENT OF METHODS OF SELF-EVALUATION IN THE DANISH SCHOOL SECTOR

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This paper will focus on self-evaluation as a method for quality enhancement and on the presentation of a pilot project aimed at developing evaluation methods adapted to the Danish school sector and discuss the following question:

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“What importance can self-evaluation derived from a model adapted to the Danish Folkeskole, have seen in a quality enhancement perspective – and what part can self-evaluation play in an external evaluation that also aims at accountability ?”

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As a background for both method and pilot project the context into which the evaluation of the primary school in Denmark fits will be described. Thereafter follows an explanation of the legal basis on which the Danish Evaluation Institute rests and the consequent obligations for the institute both as regards choice of methods and development as well as communication. The focus is then switched to the development project that led to the self-evaluation method described in the publication “Keys to Change -School Improvement through Self-Evaluation” and which till now is being used in 5 evaluation programmes in the primary and secondary school sector in Denmark. As background to putting it into perspective the interaction of the self-evaluation with other methods in the evaluation of English teaching as first foreign language is duly described.

### **The Folkeskole – a comprehensive sequence for 6 –16 year olds.**

The Folkeskole comprises a comprehensive compulsory school sequence from 1st to 9th form. It also includes a voluntary pre-school form and a voluntary 10th school year. The control of the Folkeskole, its organisation and teaching, are set out in the Folkeskole Act of 1993.

### **Management and control**

The municipal council is ultimately responsible for the educational system in a given municipality and is obliged to establish the extent to which delegation of decision-making competence and other controls are to be laid down in a management statute. The municipal council may choose to delegate part of its powers to the individual schools, e.g. decisions on the more detailed use of the school’s framework grant and its powers to appoint staff. On the other hand the authority to dismiss staff cannot be delegated, which means that neither the school board<sup>1</sup> nor the head teacher can dismiss teachers without the approval of the municipal council.

The individual school is managed by a head teacher who has both the administrative and educational management responsibility of the school and answers to the school board and the mu-

municipal council for the schoolwork. In addition (s)he is to carry out his/her work in cooperation with the employees and include the school's pupils in matters appertaining to the health and safety of the pupils. As regards teaching the head is to ensure that the teachers plan and structure the class work with challenges for all pupils.

### **Supervision**

It is also the municipal council in the individual municipality that supervises the work of the schools. The supervision includes both administrative and educational work. There are no detailed provisions as to extent and character of the municipal supervision. As often as not the municipal supervision of the educational work in the schools is exercised relatively informally, e.g. through educational advisers whose function is primarily advisory and coordinating in relation to the schools. Complaints about the school's work are also to be directed to the municipal council but complaints rarely get beyond the administrative level.

Nor is there any tradition for any proper "educational inspection" or evaluations of the general school practice being carried out by the municipalities. In the latter years increasingly more municipalities have been tending to adopt a strategy of overall municipal school policy combined with a considerable degree of decentralisation for the individual school. This is frequently followed up by a demand that the schools draw up working plans encompassing partly a report on the school's work in the previous year and partly a development plan for the coming year. The working plan is in some instances made the subject of a talk between the municipal executive for schools and the head teacher, though this is not generally formalised. And there is nothing laid down nationally about producing working plans.

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### **The organisation of the teaching**

The Folkeskole Act of 1993 elaborates the distinctive Danish principle about the class or form being the principal unit with the class teacher as the coordinator for all matters relating to the class. The maximum number of pupils in a class is 28. The subjects are traditional, but the Act specifies that the subjects are to be worked with individually and themes and problems dealt with across the range of the subjects. This means that the pupils are taught all obligatory subjects in the same class from 1st – 9th form. A team of teachers with different professional qualifications do the teaching of the subjects, and this team is obliged to collaborate on the structuring of the class work. Normally the same teacher teaches the class a subject over a period of 5-9 years.

### **Fundamental principles for the teaching**

The law prescribes that the Folkeskole is a comprehensive school where the pupils are not to be split up on ability and results. Pursuing this principle the law lays down differentiated teaching formulated this way: 'The structuring of the teaching, hereunder choice of teaching- and work procedures, methods, teaching aids and selection of material shall in all subjects live up to the purpose of the primary school and shall be varied so that it matches the needs and qualifications of each individual pupil' and 'At each class level and in each subject teacher and pupil are to cooperate continuously on establishing the objectives they seek to achieve'. These two requirements have to be combined with an ongoing evaluation of what the pupils have learned as a basis for the further planning of the teaching. The Act also contains provisions to the effect that all pupils are to be offered national and local tests in text comprehension, written formulation, mathematics, languages, physics/chemistry at the close of the 9th and 10th school year. Apart from the above mentioned there are no national tests in the compulsory school sequence. On the other hand the Act seeks to introduce project work throughout the school programme, and in the 9th form all pupils have to work out a project to be marked locally. The individual 6th

former also works with a career training book adjusted to his/her work and leading to a personal training plan in the 9th form – a plan based on the pupil's own resources and capabilities.

### **The teaching content**

When the Act came into effect the teaching content was laid down through a hierarchy of documents so that certain obligatory goals and central knowledge and proficiency areas were established nationally for all subjects, whereas guiding curricula and teaching guidelines were sent out to municipalities and schools. The municipalities were thus committed to drawing up curricula for the individual subjects and to ensuring the implementation of the law. The Act and its associated documents are based on an objective- and framework control model that consider for the power sharing between state and municipality.

### **Implementation of the Act**

During the first half of the nineties a number of results - unsatisfactory for Denmark - from international surveys of reading, mathematics and science proficiencies were published. This meant that the implementation of the new Act was somewhat neglected in many places favouring an increased focus, particularly on the teaching of the subject, reading, and the municipalities spent many resources on improving their efforts in this field.

In the years after the new Act came into force it was obvious that the law had had little impact. Hence it was decided in 1996-97 to start a sweeping development programme to kick-start the desired development. The development project was concluded with a national evaluation in 2000 that proved that the programme had indeed given an impetus to the development in large parts of the designated fields.

The focus on the academic proficiencies, introduced by the international surveys, continued concurrently and ended in 2001/02 with the government accepting a programme to strengthen the the academic proficiencies under the title "Clear goals". The key part of this programme was a reformulation of the central knowledge- and proficiency areas for the individual subjects plus advisory progression goals expressing "expectations of what the pupils know and can do within the different areas of the subject" at the end of the various class levels starting with 2nd form.

Originally these goals were guiding for the municipalities, though they were obliged to work out progression goals or alternatively adopt these goals as mandatory. In the autumn of 2002 these goals became part of a compromise agreement between the government and part of the opposition, changing from guiding to becoming mandatory, so that the Folkeskole now has national grade goals for the subjects and for the school's responsibility for the all-round personal development of the pupils. Henceforth the municipalities are under obligation to draw up descriptions of the progress between the individual grade-goals and up to the final goals for the individual subjects.

The political settlement also has a number of organisational changes incorporated aimed at supporting the implementation of the Act of 1993.

### **Historical background to evaluation in the Folkeskole**

As seen from the above the degree of decentralisation is high, and the work of the schools is characterised by a high degree of autonomy. By the same token the demands on the Folkeskole for assuring a solid foundation for the continued education of the children have intensified. The nineties have seen an increasing intensification for putting quality enhancement, evaluation and transparency on the agenda of the Danish school debate, but systematic supervision and external evaluation were still not part of the formal Danish school system in the nineties.

Not only the primary and secondary area, but also the entire educational sector discussed and tried out the various forms of evaluation right through the nineties. The primary sector focussed primarily on internal quality enhancement- and internal evaluation processes. Both the ministry of education and others developed instruments and assisted with consultation for schools that on their own took the initiative to start internal quality enhancement. In the primary sector the ministry of education developed an internet-based tool "Quality development in the Folkeskole" offering a wide range of tools for quality development and evaluation and providing opportunities for exchanging experiences across the school system. External evaluation of the school authorities and individual schools was in that period left to either the research sector or consultancy firms appointed to evaluate -mostly by municipal councils in connection with e.g. consumer satisfaction surveys.

It was from the mid-nineties that debate about the need for an ongoing external evaluation of the Folkeskole started to accelerate. The debate was often animated by the concern of educationalists about the experiences other European countries had in establishing inspectorates. However, there was political agreement that not just the primary and secondary school area, but also the whole of the education sector needed permanent and external evaluation.

**The Danish Evaluation Institute – a single organisation responsible for the evaluation of the entire educational sector**

As something very unique in an international context, the Danish Parliament decided to establish the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) as a single organisation responsible for the evaluation of all public educations under the Ministry of Education. The Institute was established as an independent state institution under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, managed by the Executive Director being responsible to the Board.

EVA's task is to contribute to the assurance and enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning. A given evaluation may involve the entire course of study, individual subjects, relationships between subjects/courses or an entire institution. An evaluation, however, will normally be based on the national and local objectives for the course in question.

Yet it should be added that EVA is deeply committed to the work on the international development in the higher education area, which at present, among other things, looks like moving towards accentuating the criterion-based evaluations. This can also be seen from the method development EVA itself is implementing in relation to evaluation of higher education. It is still not clear how this will influence evaluation in the primary school area. However, in connection with the action plan 2002 a pilot project has been launched within EVA's knowledge centre. The purpose of the pilot project, based on the evaluation of first foreign language English teaching is to lay down criteria for good English teaching.

As mentioned above EVA is also the government's centre of knowledge for educational evaluation and part of its duty is to compile and communicate national as well as international experiences in the field of educational evaluation.

Establishing EVA was the first step towards the introduction of state initiated and controlled evaluations of primary and secondary education in the history of the Danish school system, the implication being that it was necessary to develop valuation methods adapted to these sectors.

The Law states that:

- An evaluation should focus on both processes and outcomes

- Evaluation methods vary and are adapted to the various educational sectors
- A self evaluation is a mandatory element of the documentation
- Participating in an evaluation initiated by EVA is mandatory for 'The Folkeskole'
- An external evaluation group consisting of external experts with special expertise in the evaluation field is responsible for the content of the evaluation
- In a concluding report the evaluation group presents its analysis, assessment and recommendations. The report is published
- The self-evaluating schools and the competent authority will publish a follow-up plan. within 6 months after the publication of the report.
- One of EVA's tasks is the development and improvement of evaluation and Quality enhancement.

#### **Pilot project for development of evaluation methods in the Folkeskole**

EVA decided to spend the first year in evaluating the Folkeskole carrying out a development project directed at developing and testing methods for evaluation of the primary school area. The projects were implemented in cooperation with two municipalities and as actual evaluations in accordance with the legal requirements described and were concluded with two public evaluation reports.

The pilot projects were about evaluation of two municipal school authorities with six schools each. Focus of the evaluations was the implementation of the school policy adopted by the municipal council. The main themes of the evaluations – and with that also the theme of the self-evaluation – were, as a knock-on effect, the interaction between the municipal level and the school level, school management, the school's development culture, teamwork on teaching and the cooperation between the school and the parents.

The model presented here is based on feed back from teachers and school managers at the 12 schools, educational advisers and management representatives from the two local education authorities which participated in the evaluation.

One of the important premises for the development of the model and the acceptance of evaluation in the primary school sector from both teachers and those responsible at the level of local education authorities has proven to be a well-functioning dialogue.

#### **The self-evaluation model in the primary school**

The model rests on three very important assumptions, ie. that participants commit themselves to:

- Conduct reflection and writing processes in groups
- Describe their practices in a free and open form
- Reflect on both structural and cultural factors that seem to influence their practice

In addition the self-evaluation report worked out by the schools has a dual purpose. It is meant to constitute the documentary basis for the external evaluation group and by the same token contribute to the school's own development in the evaluated area. This means that is to be of such calibre that it provides a fundamental and systematic knowledge of the school or the theme under evaluation, and that it is to start a process that stimulates self-reflection and school development.

In terms of the internal development perspective the model has a twofold purpose, i.e. focus on the practice and stimulation of the dialogue by asking the questions: “why are we doing what we do? And to create new practice by asking the question: “What can we change, what will we change and how are we going to do it?”

In EVA's experience the model can

- elucidate how the school practice can be created through ‘written’ as well as ‘unwritten’ rules
- legitimise the questioning of actual practice and promote arguments for innovation
- create room so that employees can spell out their wishes for the school's future development
- ensure an open dialogue about ‘the unwritten rules’ so as to work on their importance
- promote common understanding and common images and create a basis for a new practice.

Self-evaluation can be the key opening up for new understanding and new images of a wished for future and thus becoming the launching pad for the decisions and especially the practice to be established after the evaluation. The teachers and heads that form part of a self-evaluation process must ensure that dialogue and frankness are brought to bear on the work.

### **The preparatory phase**

Irrespective of whether the self-evaluation is initiated internally in a school or in a municipality and is not linked to external evaluators or if it is an external evaluation initiated by EVA it is essential that those involved know the whole process.

An evaluation started by EVA will have a sequence consisting of

- preliminary survey
- terms of reference
- establishment of an evaluation group
- self-evaluation based on guidelines drawn up by EVA
- site visit and interviews based on the schools' self-evaluation reports
- collection of other written documentation
- implementation of quantitative surveys
- report with conclusions and recommendations
- publication
- follow-up by the school and the authorities.

A self-evaluation sequence according to EVA's model, but initiated locally, would minimally embrace

- a preparatory phase, headed by a steering group
- a self-evaluation phase
- a follow-up phase
- an action phase

In the preparatory phase the steering group establishes the focus and the key factors to be taken up in the self-evaluation, so that all who work with the self-evaluation can maintain the same focus and direction in the process.

The steering group will also sketch out the overall frameworks in the form of legal basis, national and local goals and frameworks and relevant educational or professional papers. That way possibilities and limitations are made visible. In this manner it will be discerned whether the

school's available room for action has been exhausted or if there are openings for development within the existing frameworks.

Finally it is important that the requirements for format and contents in the written results of the self-evaluation get clarified and described by the steering group. This will ensure that both process and result from several different groups deal with the same focus and achieve a comparable result, even if both process and format allow for free formulation.

Before the process is launched the steering group must decide on the composition of self-evaluation groups. EVA's experience with both homogeneous groups and groups representing differing views and qualifications is that homogeneous groups have their strength in their ability to get to the depth in presenting the problems and are adept at describing practices, whereas mixed groups are more prone to discussions and to giving written result a broader and more consensus-seeking perspective.

Whether the groups should be homogeneous or mixed depends to a great extent on the purpose and the width of the evaluation focus.

### **The Self-evaluation process**

The process is linked to the phases in the model below.

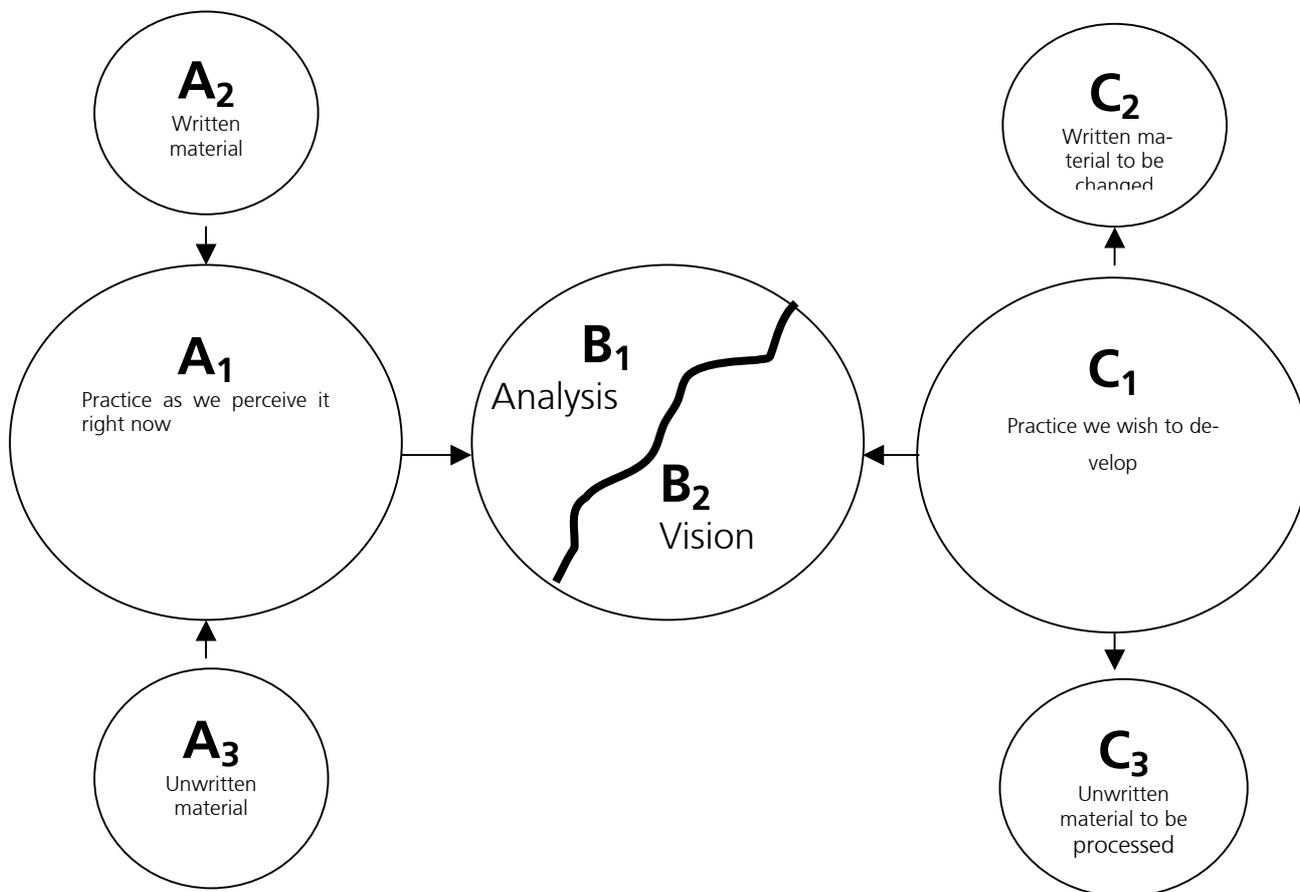
The theoretical basis of the model is, among others, imported from the cultural analyses of organisational theoreticians. This is in the following coupled to the model's section on the interplay between the formal and the informal, here called the written and unwritten. The background is that organisations set goals, create structures and undertake planning of their activities to reach the goals. This applies to schools as well. You often see that what really takes place deviates from the agreed goals and guidelines. To understand this you have to find out what moves people to act, also when they are members of an organisation. Cultural theory explains the phenomenon inasmuch as people's actions to a large extent are steered by norms, values, habits, identity and feelings. From such a perspective the work of creating a common understanding, common images and a common language becomes important factors in the development of an organisation.

The problem is not that norms and values are unwritten, but that the organisations do not use this knowledge about steering in its development processes to the same extent as they use formal rules and decisions.

The concrete model is to be regarded as the structure the self-evaluation report is to have, and which is divided into a practice description, an analysis, a vision part and an action plan

**A<sub>1</sub>** describes the practice as it is expressed at the time of the self-evaluation.

**A<sub>2</sub>** describes the main elements in the written goals, frameworks and rules mandatory to the theme being evaluated. If a value basis has been written down it should be included here.



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**A<sub>3</sub>** involves the hardest task because it is not about facts, but about something which is linked to a pedagogical view, an attitude to the job, personal values etc. Focus here is on routines and ideas about what is important in the school and which influences the written practice. It might be arguments often used in educational debates, or traditions nobody questions. Finally it might be completely personal attitudes and comprehensions of the school's task that play a part in inhibiting or promoting something about to be developed.

The first part of the analysis focuses on why practice evolves the way it does – to what extent practice is based in the written or the unwritten basis.

The second part of the analysis is an assessment of practice with a view to identifying strengths and weaknesses in the described practice. This part must also contain the reasons for assessing something as strengths and other things as weaknesses.

This concludes the descriptive and analytical part of the report, which primarily has had its eye on the present and drawn a picture of the group's common image of practice.

Under **B<sub>2</sub>** the group answers the question: "What does the future look like that you would like to play your part in creating – if everything was possible?"

This implies that the group describes the vision in such a way that the recipient can visualise what the group conceives about a future practice within the described theme.

Next step is the action plan where a picture needs to be drawn of a practice capable of implementation and which the group will commit itself to work for.

**C<sub>1</sub>** continues with the result both of the analysis part and the vision part. Thus the description is based on a number of choices and assessments of what is feasible within the period allowed for the implementation. As a minimum describe how changes in respect of the key factors (see the preparatory phase) are to be realised in the new practice, and those criteria vital for the success of the implementation.

Winding up its work the group must react to which of the previously described goals, frameworks etc. that need to be amended so that they can support the new practice. This is described under **C<sub>2</sub>**. But it is equally important to revert to **A<sub>3</sub>** to see which unwritten rules and norms were assigned significance as promoters and inhibitors.

**C<sub>3</sub>** describes which of these factors the whole of the school ought to focus on in the implementation phase –either because they can support the implementation of the new things, or because they constitute a counter-culture that may prevent the implementation.

From this concluding chapter it will be deduced if the school is to take some small steps in a progressive development process or if it is about to make a quantum leap.

A school that continuously interacts with its environment and defines quality in collaboration with its stakeholders will often be abreast of the expectations they have, and be part of a constant development. Such a school will be making strides big or small. Only when the surroundings change dramatically will quantum leaps be required.

A school, on the other hand, that leads its own inner life with focus on quality defined as professionalism of the highest order and which has a less dynamic interaction with its environment will at times need to make a big stride so as not to get out of step with its stakeholders. Such quantum leaps may cost rather a lot of resources and open up for conflicts, but if they do succeed they breathe new life into the school.

A lack of awareness of such factors may be very significant as to how schools experience demands for change. Self-evaluation can in this type of process be a help to self-reflection and to obtaining a common image and a common language about the schoolwork.

### **The written result**

When a self-evaluation is initiated by the school itself and the self-evaluation report is not to function as documentation in an external evaluation it becomes important that the self-evaluators conclude their report with a number of recommendations to the school – which, let it be said, are a number of actions for implementation that they themselves wish to share.

In EVA's experience some self-evaluations reveal a surprising practice and hitherto unknown angles and conceptions leading to wished for quantum leaps. Others form the background for taking bigger or smaller steps in a development already begun. If colleagues or other professional groups, parents or decision-makers are to understand and support these changes they must have insight in the thoughts that have led to the new ways. And they can get precisely that through the self-evaluation report.

Another aspect of the self-evaluation report is that –if the evaluation covers themes the whole school is involved in, e.g. bullying, management or working relations between school and parents –it enables the various groups in the school to draw their picture of school practice. That

way it can play its part in making the individual view his/her school through different glasses and get a more holistic understanding of it.

The self-evaluation also takes stock of the status quo in the evaluated area. The development initiated and the results it achieves can later be used to make comparisons with that picture precisely because it is written down.

### **Follow-up and action**

As a follow-up of the written result the steering group must ensure

- that the target group and all involved get the total written result of the evaluation
- that a common picture, based on the self-evaluation, is formulated of the changed practice
- that the school now seeks to implement
- that responsibility, duty to act and milestones in the action phase are agreed and are clear to all
- that success criteria and times are fixed for evaluation of the new practice.

### **Self-evaluation in combination with other methods**

The described self-evaluation model is now being used by a number of schools in Denmark at their own initiative and by consultants in connection with further education just as it is the basis for the evaluations EVA has initiated consequent upon the pilot project.

2001 saw the start of an evaluation of the pre-school class and an evaluation of the context between the final exams in the primary school and the preceding teaching and the importance of the exams. Both these evaluations are completed and they have given EVA a positive response to the model. In the school year 2002 the teaching of English as first foreign language is being evaluated. This is the first evaluation of a subject in the primary school, and again the model was used and has given the evaluation group good insight in the teachers' working methods and thought processes as well as a number of factors that bear on the work and learning of the pupils.

The pupils too took part in the evaluation of both the school-leaving exams and English with statements on practice and assessments. The method used here is called pupils' café. It is described in the publication 'Keys to change –School improvement through Self-Evaluation' and has in both evaluations contributed with important viewpoints.

This leads to an account of how the self-evaluation interacts with other methods in EVA's evaluations in the primary school field. The following description is based on the current evaluation of English in the primary school, because it comprises an assessment of the interaction factors in the teaching and an analysis of the result of the school's teaching.

The sequence is planned so that the part of the evaluation focussing on the teaching is introduced by a self-evaluation carried out by teachers and heads in seven schools geographically and socio-economically selected. Then 42 arbitrarily selected pupils from the same seven schools are invited to the pupils' café-days. Based on the self-evaluation reports and the reports from the two pupils' cafés the evaluation group conducts interviews with the teachers and heads of the seven schools and with the municipal executives responsible for the schools. After that trained observers will carry out class room observation in the same seven schools. The observation focuses on how the oral aspect is expressed in the teaching situation. The ensuing

results are reported to the evaluation group. Parallel to that a quantitative survey among a representative segment of English teachers and school managers in the primary school is conducted with a view to verifying the trends that were apparent in the evaluation of the seven schools.

The above constitutes the entire documentation of the evaluation group as regards an assessment of the interaction factors in teaching. But at the same time 1 500 arbitrarily chosen pupils in the 9th form have participated in an international survey initiated under EU-auspices, which is testing their ability as regards listening- and reading skills as well as their grammar knowledge and their ability to complete a dialogue in written form. The survey also includes a questionnaire for pupils and teachers on their perception of teaching, framework- and background factors assumed to have influenced both teaching and learning.

The evaluation is finally followed up by a pilot project where seven teachers from the self-evaluating schools, independent of the conclusions and recommendations by the evaluation group, define criteria for good teaching together with an evaluation consultant from EVA. This means that the evaluation group, and with that EVA, get an opportunity within the subject English to combine an evaluation focussing on the teaching content with a survey that focuses on an actual topical result of the latter years' English teaching thus enabling them to make assessments based on both perspectives. Add to that, and using bottom-up philosophy, the initiative was taken to make the executive level, i.e. the teachers, formulate criteria for good teaching.

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#### **Putting things in perspective**

As the evaluation is still in progress it is impossible to state anything about the result, but merely to hold this up against the previously described educational policy and development that have moved from an extensive decentralisation to a higher degree of central steering of the goals for the teaching in general – and, in effect, also the English teaching.

EVA wishes with this paper to invite to a general debate based on the following questions:

*“How is the self-evaluation model viewed with its focus on cultural steering as an active tool for quality enhancement in the primary school?”*

*“Which possibilities is self-evaluation, as a method, thought to have in a context where attention is directed towards the extent to which the schools and the municipalities live up to national grade goals?”*

*“What are the prospects of EVA, with the approach used in the English evaluation, living up to its commitment in the future and in the same process create transparency in the educational system and contribute to quality enhancement?”*