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Equity through interventions?

- Tracing the possibilities and challenges of an equitable initiative in a Copenhagen school district.

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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 is a very ambitious goal and, according to several Danish researchers, a difficult one to attain.

This paper discusses the possibilities and challenges of a project carried out in a partnership between The Danish Evaluation Institute and a suburban Copenhagen school district (Ishøj).

The project is based on an assumption that the educational achievement of children can be improved by interventions at an early stage in children's education, with focus on:

- developing strategies and cultures across local institutions in a school district;
- working with the cultural resources of the group of children as a whole.

The partners in the project are teachers from a kindergarten, a primary school and an after-school club, together with local officials and evaluation consultants.

The contents of the paper

This paper consists of:
- a short presentation of a strategy for dealing with inequity in education;
- an introduction to the method by which the strategy was developed by the partners in the project;
- a discussion of the potentials of developing strategies and cultures across local institutions in a school district;
- a discussion of the potentials of working with the cultural resources of the group of children as a whole.

A strategy for dealing with inequity in education

Danish research indicates that processes of marginalisation are effective at a very early stage in children's lives. This is related to the social and cultural resources of the parents, but these processes are sometimes reinforced in the institutions when teachers, often without the intention of doing so, take part in processes of selection that tend to place some children in marginalised positions (Jensen, 2005, p. 7-9). A Danish study of the way children and preschool teachers are physically placed in a room shows that the social hierarchy of society is also reproduced through access to the teacher's attention (Palludan, 2004). The same study shows that "the teaching tone" of discipline and the "exchange tone" of recognition are unequally distributed among children and tend to reproduce socio-cultural hierarchies (Palludan, 2007, p. 75).

When trying to change the mechanisms that seem to produce or support inequity, it is possible to adopt different strategies. The project presented in this paper is based on the assumption that when we try to develop a higher degree of equity in schools, we must take the local cultural resources and practices seriously and work with the interconnectedness of the informal and formal communities of learning. If a higher degree of equity in children's educational opportunities and achievements is the goal, it might be useful to work from the perspective of the inclusive classroom, with the aim of including and engaging the cultural resources and interests of the children in the formal learning activities.

The following section introduces the method by which this strategy was developed by the partners in the project.

The method of the project

The interventions of the project are based on **a program theory** developed by the partners through a joint process of dialogue. The program theory represents a series of assumptions about how the chosen interventions will affect children's learning opportunities from both a long-term and a more intermediate perspective. The assumptions are partly based on the experiences of the program staff and their knowledge about the institutions, the children and families in the neighbourhood, and partly on research-based knowledge.

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. Often, when you develop a program theory, you identify chains of causes and effects that represent your expectations of how a program works. In this project we developed the program theory the other way around. This means we began the process by identifying the desired outcomes, and then worked backwards to end up with the activities. On the basis of our discussions, we drew up a set of shared basic assumptions about inequality of opportunity and methods of working with it.

In short, the project adopted the long term perspective of reducing potential barriers for the children's participation in further education. The intervention, however, is focused on the transition from kindergarten to first year of primary school, and also on the children's dual daily lives in their school and after-school club. This means that we have primarily focused on children aged 5 to 7. The long-term perspective of increased participation in further education was therefore translated by the partners into a short-term goal of increased possibilities for participation in formal and informal communities of learning, and this goal was then translated into a number of interventions and activities in the three institutions.

Our role in the present phase of the project primarily concerns monitoring the program and collecting data to determine whether the program works as expected, as well as explaining discrepancies between the theory and what actually happens (if there are discrepancies).This does to some extent lead to the introduction of new activities and methods. In this way, the evaluation process focuses on reality testing and learning.

In the remainder of the paper, we present a few of the activities which have been implemented in the institutions. First we discuss the potentials of developing strategies and cultures across institutions in a school district, and then we focus on the potentials of working with the cultural resources of the group of children as a whole, rather than focusing on the problems of individual children.

Developing strategies and cultures across institutions in a school district
The project involves a focus on creating shared strategies to deal with the educational achievements of children in this particular neighbourhood/school district. This focus on local cooperation is partly inspired by The Centre for Equity in Education, University of Manchester, where researchers have been working to unify various local resources in shared strategies. The objective of this project is, however, somewhat more limited in scope. Only three institutions – a kindergarten, a school and an after-school club – have so far participated in the project.

Reasons for increased cooperation
It is very appropriate to raise the question, "Why is it important for institutions to cooperate and develop new strategies across institutions?" As we see it, there are at least two important reasons for increased cooperation:

- cooperation creates a sense of coherence;
- cooperation makes it possible to exchange knowledge.

The first reason is related to the fact that children's daily lives are carried out in separate spheres. The program theory of the project suggests that a stronger

sense of coherence can possibly produce a sense of familiarity and security which will enable the children to profit from the learning activities. The children move between institutions and from one space to another – from kindergarten to the after-school club and the school. Each sphere entails a new group of adults, a new institutional context and, possibly, new rules that need to be followed. It is, therefore, relevant to investigate whether it is possible to make this transition smoother for the children and for their parents, and whether it is easier for the children to participate in the formal and informal activities if rules and expectations are more clearly communicated and, perhaps even to some extent, similar in the different institutions? This is based on the assumption that learning the codes constitutes a rather fundamental part of integrating into a new institutional context. For some children this is not difficult, whereas others might benefit from cooperation across the different contexts.

A second advantage of increased cooperation and dialogue is the possibility of exchanging knowledge about methods, the children and the parents. When information and advice about the children and the families is handed over from one institution to another, it makes it possible for the institutions to respond effectively if problems occur.

Positive effects of cooperation so far
The new model for cooperation in the school district is still in a very early phase and has not yet been systematically evaluated. However, at this stage we can trace some examples of positive effects:

Increased familiarity through common activities
In the kindergarten the sense of coherence has successfully been strengthened by activities which were carried out in the cooperation between teachers from the different institutions using the premises of the school. More specifically, the children set up a theatre play during the final months of their time in the kindergarten, and in this process they became familiar with the teachers from the school and the after-school club, and with the physical locations.

Negotiating expectations concerning the children´s learning
Another important feature of the dialogue is the possibility to discuss and balance the expectations of the school towards the children´s learning in kindergarten. Teachers from the different institutions discovered that they had different ideas about the children´s learning in kindergarten, e.g. is it important for the kindergarten to teach the alphabet, or would a focus on others competences be more relevant? It seems to be very important for the teachers to negotiate their expectations in order to strengthen the children´s transitions from kindergarten to school.

Common strategies for involving parents
The daily cooperation between the after-school club and the school is also an

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advantage when the school tries to strengthen its communication with the parents and when new types of parental involvement are introduced. The club seems to have another way of communicating with the parents. In many cases they see the parents every day and, therefore, opportunities to pass on information and encourage parents to take part in different activities in the school. This is relevant, for example, when the school wants to ensure that all parents participate in the children´s first day at school.

Shared vision and strategy
Even though the project is still in an initial phase, it is possible to conclude that it is very useful to develop a common vision and strategy related to the children´s participation and learning across the three institutions. The project staff, i.e. the teachers, asses this part of the project very positively, and they have developed a model for future cooperation which they intend to use. They have also decided to invite the other kindergartens in the district to join them.

Working with the cultural resources of the group of children as a whole
The interventions in the project are primarily aimed at the group level, based on the assumption that it is possible for all children to gain from interventions in the group. When working with children in a school and in a neighbourhood where problems are likely to occur, the project works from an assumption that it is possible to prevent further problems by intervention that focuses on including all children in the formal and informal communities of learning.

Mapping the children's relations and well-being
Part of the intervention in the project is aimed at ensuring that all children get the teacher's attention during a certain period of time. In the after-school club, the teachers have decided to employ a procedure to ensure that they hold a brief talk about relations and well-being with each and every child over a period of fourteen days. In the school, they use a similar procedure to ensure that all children engage in a 5 – 10 minute one to one activity with the teacher and take part in at least one activity with the teacher in a small group each month. In the school, this method is combined with an interview with each child twice a year. The interview is based on an open questionnaire about the child's relations and well-being in the class room. This implies that the teacher maps the children's relations with each other based on the interviews and takes further action to work with the inclusion of all the children if any problems are identified.[1] This is based on the assumption that children's learning also takes place in and is connected to informal communities of learning, and this means that it is very important for teachers to be focused on these communities and ensure the possibilities for all the children to be part of and engage in informal learning.

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[1] A Danish description of the method can be found in: Høiby, Helle (2008):*Ikke mere mobning*, Dafolo.

Using information about the children's interests, resources and preferences
In the project, different methods are used which seek to avoid categorising and stigmatizing "problem children", and instead making the children and their specific resources and interests the focus of the teacher's attention. The methods should make the teacher focus on the the children's resources in order to find ways of motivating them for participation in learning activities and, thereby, increase possibilities for development and learning. The project suggests that it is important to use methods that make all the children and the differences among them visible to the teachers.

It is argued that a more problem oriented approach that focuses on identifying the difficulties of the child and on carrying out interventions that focus on the child who bears the problem can be an obstacle for development. To view the child as a bearer of problems can make it harder for the professionals to spot and appreciate the resources of the child, and this can lead to low expectations from the professionals with a risk of relating to the child in a way that will be an obstacle to development and achievement (Jensen, 2005 p. 142 and Ejrnæs et, al. 2005).

More specifically, the interventions in the project focus on the children's motivation for the more formal activities that are offered in the kindergarten, the school and the after-school club. The teachers interview the children in order to map their resources and activity preferences and, subsequently, use this information in planning activities for the particular group of children.

The interviews focus on children's resources and activity preferences in the different contexts of their everyday life. This makes it possible to draw on knowledge about the children's informal communities of learning when planning the formal learning activities and developing a menu of possible activities and facilities for the children during less adult-regulated periods of the day.

The method is still being discussed and further developed in the project group, and it is not in this early phase possible to give an account of its effects. The main challenge, however, seems very clear. The difficult part is not so much listening to the children's preferences and ideas, but changing/adjusting the learning environment accordingly. This seems to constitute one of the major challenges within the project, because it demands new and more flexible ways of planning activities for and with the children.

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