

A Key to Change

School Improvement through Self-evaluation

THE DANISH
EVALUATION INSTITUTE



A Key to Change

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In June 1999 the Danish Parliament decided to establish the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) as an independent institute evaluating education from pre-school stage to adult post-graduate teaching. Part of EVA's remit, therefore, is to develop methods to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning in the primary school and to implement evaluations in this educational segment. The initiative expressed a departure from the Danish school traditions, marked, as they are, by goal-oriented monitoring and established frameworks based on modest government quality control and considerable local autonomy and control. The legal requirements and the subsequently developed methods are to be seen in that light.

One statutory requirement for EVA's evaluations is that a group of experts with knowledge of the field evaluated is to be made responsible for the conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation report. Add to that the insistence on the self-evaluation forming an obligatory part of the documentation and the requirement that the methods are to be adapted to the educational segment and thus cover an aspect of control as well as one of development.

On that background EVA initiated a pilot project in the primary school with the dual purpose of developing methods to be used in future evalu-

ations and of contributing to quality development in the school systems concerned. The development of methods was based on a general knowledge of evaluation and on field trials.

It is the result of this process that is presented in this publication, which is a translation of the Danish version, which is seen as an inspiration to teachers, school heads and others who work with quality development in the primary school. The main thrust is the self-evaluation model with the school professionals as its target groups, and the café model whose primary target group is the pupils. It also contains perspectives as to how questionnaire surveys may be used to boost local school development. Finally, it describes the values of including external parties in an evaluation.

EVA hopes that the result can be of interest in an international school context because the methods described in the same process combine the values in an internal evaluation with an external perspective of quality in the school's solution of its problems. That way we have in the Danish context succeeded in achieving a high degree of legitimacy for both evaluation results and methods.

Christian Thune
Director

As an integrated part of the pilot evaluation, EVA started thinking and developing a new way of self-evaluating in the Folkeskole. The aim of the self-evaluation is

to provide a thorough and systematic knowledge about the school or theme under evaluation

to start a process aimed at stimulating self-reflection and school development.

Model for self-evaluation

The model presented by EVA here was made on the basis of cooperation with about 200 colleagues and heads in the schools of Hirtshals and Middelfart. They worked with a model designed by EVA and gave their invaluable response to the revision of the model.

The model has a twofold purpose:

To focus on practice and stimulate the dialogue by asking

'Why do we do it this way?'

To establish new practice by asking

'What can we change, what do we want to change and how do we set about doing it?'

The model can

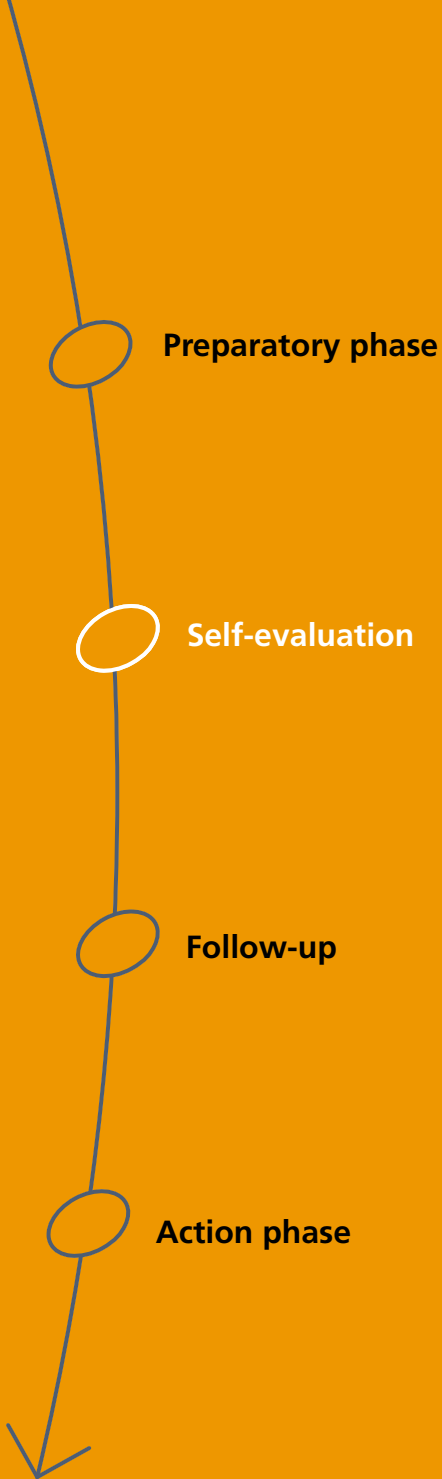
- illustrate how the practice of the school is created through both 'written' and 'unwritten rules'
- legitimise that actual practice is queried and promote arguments for novel thinking
- create scope so that you as employee can describe your ambition for the school's future
- ensure an open dialogue about the 'unwritten rules' so that their significance may be studied
- promote common understanding and common pictures and create the foundation for new practice.

Who has the key

Self-evaluation can be the key that opens up for new understandings and pictures of a desired future. But self-evaluation is not an end in itself. The core is the decisions and in particular the practice initiated after the evaluation. The colleagues and heads who form part of a self-evaluation process need to make sure that dialogue and openness are brought to bear on the work. They play an important role in the development of new practice.

From thought to action

When your school is having to change practice in an area, self-evaluation can play its part in creating quality in the working process of



Before you start, you clearly need to have considered the questions:

Who is to participate in the individual phases?

Why explicitly them?

Who does which tasks in the phases?

What milestones are there in the phases?

Which deadlines are there for the written debriefing, and who is the target group?

When does the action phase commence?

change. But precisely because the self-evaluation is but part of a coherent sequence, it is important that the whole of the process – and the background to it – is known to all involved.

A small group is established – from now on called the steering group – which is responsible for the preparation and follow-up of the self-evaluation. The composition of the group is such that its members look at the area where the work of change is to be made through their different ‘glasses’.

Focus and key factors

It is impossible to cram all school development into one process even though in practical terms things fit together and much is important. A focus is imperative if the self-evaluation is to be manageable and contribute constructively. The primary job of the steering group, therefore, is to select this focus and lay down the key factors to be dealt with in the self-evaluation. Such a focus could be the cooperation between school and those responsible for school-based leisure-time activities.

Key factors chosen within this focus might then be

- purpose of teaching
- purpose of school-based leisure-time activities

- contents of the children’s every day school life and its structure
- what do the teachers and educationalists cooperate about, and how.

Goals and framework

The steering group also outlines the overarching frameworks in the form of legal basis, national and local goals and frameworks as well as relevant initiatives of a pedagogical or professional nature. This will identify possibilities and limitations. That way it becomes visible whether you have already taken up the scope for action, or if, in fact, a number of development openings exist within the given frameworks.

Finally, it is important that the requirement for form and contents of the final written product of the self-evaluation, the self-evaluation report, is clarified and described by the steering group.

Self-evaluation groups

After that the steering group must consider the composition of self-evaluation groups. Are the groups to be homogeneous? Or are they to be composed so that different competences are represented? How do management representatives form part of them? Read more about this under the headline EVA’s experiences, page 18.

Self-evaluation

The preparatory phase

Writing makes a difference

When EVA evaluates, the self-evaluation report functions as documentation. The external evaluation group formulates its recommendations to the school as how to develop quality, e.g. on the basis of the picture the school itself presents in these reports.

When you evaluate without external assistance, it is vital that you yourselves on the basis of the self-evaluation arrive at a number of 'recommendations' that you write into the self-evaluation report, and which you would like to share in the implementation.

A self-evaluation group that have worked on team work might well recommend:

- that the school creates a cohesive link between forming the team and the principles of distribution of subjects
- that all teams combine the dialogue in the team with written minutes
- that the written part of the work also functions as a tool to visualise the team's work vis-à-vis pupils, parents and head.

Some self-evaluations reveal a surprising practice and hitherto unknown viewpoints and ideas that tempt you to make a quantum leap. Others motivate you to take steps, major or minor, as part of an already initiated development.

If colleagues, other departments, parents or decision makers are to understand and support these changes – be they quantum leaps or minor steps – they need to have insight into the thoughts that led to the new concept. And that is precisely what they can get through the self-evaluation report.

Another aspect of the self-evaluation report is that it offers the different groups in the school the opportunity to draw their particular picture of the school – and in that way it can play its part in making the individual see the school through different glasses and improve their understanding of the total picture.

The self-evaluation report also takes stock of the situation in the evaluated area. The development initiated and the results achieved can thus subsequently be compared with this picture precisely because it is retained in the written form.

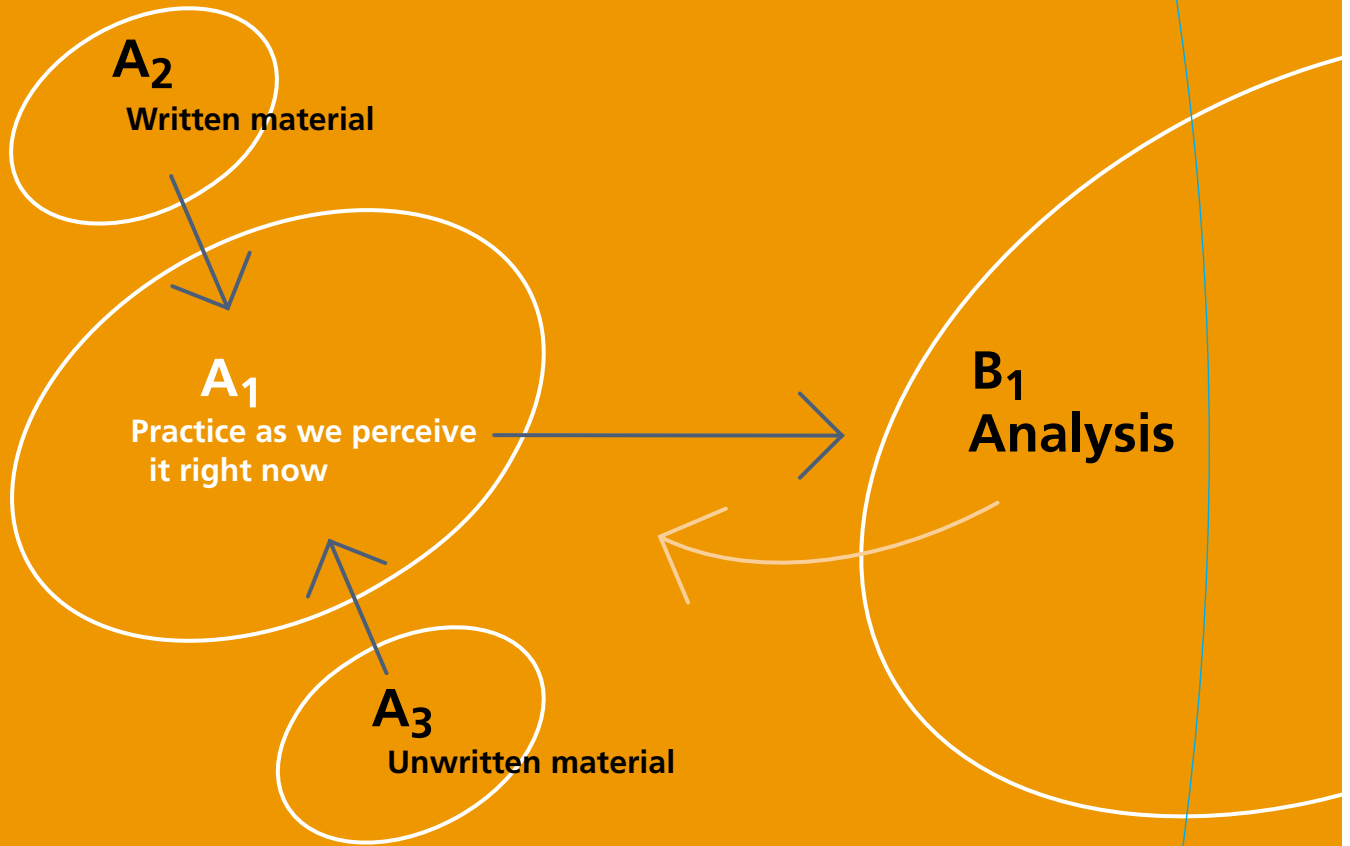
Small steps or quantum leaps?

Development processes in organisations – and thus also schools – may have widely different characters depending on the interplay with the world around it and the organisation's own culture.

An organisation that has a continuous interaction with its own environment and defines quality in cooperation with the world around it will often be abreast of the expectations of its environment and has been part of a continuous development. Such an organisation will at all times take big or small steps. Only when the environment changes dramatically, will there be a need for a quantum leap.

An organisation living its own internal life focussed on quality defined as a high degree of professionalism and having a less dynamic interaction with its environment will at times need to take a major step forward so as not to get out of step with its surroundings. Such quantum leaps may require enormous resources and are prone to conflicts, but if they succeed, they can also breathe new life into the organisation.

Lack of awareness of such factors can be of considerable significance as to how schools experience the need for change.



Phase A

A₁

Here is where you answer the question: *what do we do right now?*

This leads to a description of the practice you follow right now and the way you see it. It is important that you relate systematically to the key factors laid down for the evaluation by the steering group, see *The preparatory phase*.

A₂

Here you answer the question: *what has been decided for the theme – at the school and at other levels?*

This implies that you describe the main elements in the written goals, frameworks and rules decided for the theme you evaluate. If you have a formulated and written set of values for the school, you include that here.

A₃

Here you answer the question: *which unwritten rules and attitudes affect practice?*

This is the hardest task because it is not about facts but about something which is linked to a pedagogical concept, an attitude to the job, personal values etc. This often takes longer and is more challenging, but it is an important



Model for self-evaluation

part of the self-evaluation. You must focus on routines and concepts as to what is important in the school – particularly concepts and routines which you believe to bear on the practice you have just described. It might be arguments often used in the pedagogical discussions or traditions that nobody queries, but which you really think are relevant to the theme. Finally, it might be quite personal attitudes and perceptions as to the task of the school which you believe to play a part as incentives or impediments when something new is to be developed – once again only within the theme you are in the process of evaluating.

Before you get on to phase B, it is essential that you have written the things you dealt with under phase A into the self-evaluation report, see the chapter *Writing makes a difference*.

Phase B

B₁

The first part of the analysis focuses on why practice evolves the way it does.

This you clarify through the work with the following three questions:

Which parts of practice are reflected in the written material?

Which parts of practice are reflected in what is not written down?

What has had the greatest importance for the written practice as a whole?

The second part of the analysis focuses on what you think of the part of the school practice you described under A₁. Here you work partly with two main questions and partly with justifying your answers.

Which strengths do you see in the practice described?

Which weaknesses do you see in the practice described?

Your answer is to contain both your answers to the questions and your reasoning for considering something as a force and other aspects as weaknesses.

B₁ Analysis

B₂ Vision

Here ends the descriptive and analytical part of the task primarily focusing on the present and giving you a common picture of where you are right now.

The attention is now turned to the future.

B₂

Here you answer the question: *how does that future look which you would like to play your part in shaping – if all were possible?*

This implies that you describe the vision in such a way that the reader can get a picture of your ideas of another practice. Description must as a minimum contain your ideas as to how the key factors which form part of the description of 'Practice right now' (A₁) look in the vision.

When you have finished describing your reflections and visions in phase B, you have an analysis result and a written vision on paper. These form the basis for a process where you decide which to your mind are to be the consequences of your self-evaluation on the school practice.

These are the consequences to which you have to turn your attention in phase C.

Phase C

C₁

How do we cope in a future practice? is the central question in phase C.

The picture of a future practice looming up here can contain elements both from the analysis of current practice and from the vision.

The description, therefore, builds on a series of choices and assessments of what it is possible to bring about within the period at our disposal for the implementation.

You must, as a minimum, describe:

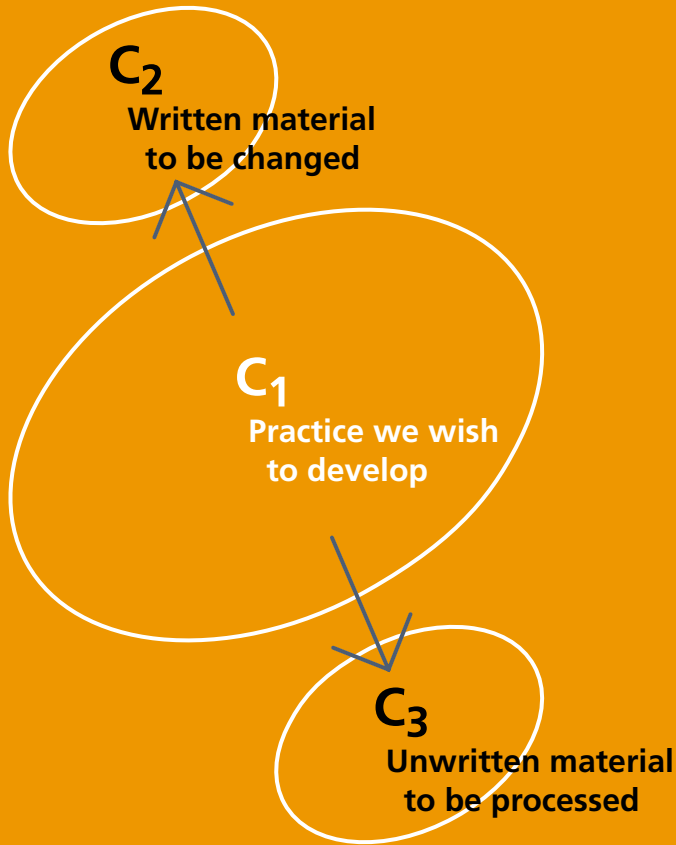
- how you view the key factors realised in the new practice
- the signs that have to be seen in the changed practice in order to pronounce it a success.

If this described future practice is to be brought into being, the group needs, as a conclusion to its written work, to consider C₂ and C₃.

C₂

Which written goals, frameworks etc. are to be revised in relation to the future practice?

Here you go back to A₂ and look at which goals and frameworks are having to be changed so that they can support your new practice. You



are not to reformulate these, simply point out those relevant.

C₃

Which unwritten rules and norms need to be worked on so as to bring the future practice into effect?

Here you go back to A₃ and look at which 'unwritten rules' and norms you weighted as incentives or impediments. Here you put down which of these factors you think the school should focus on when you start the work on implementing the changed practice – either because you believe they can boost your work, or because you see an anti-culture that may obstruct the implementation.

And now what

The written result of your self-evaluation will now form part of the school's total material consisting of a number of self-evaluation reports which the steering group will have to process in the follow-up phase described in the next chapter.

Model for self-evaluation

B₂
Vision

C₂

Written material
to be changed

C₁

Practice we wish
to develop

C₃

Unwritten material
to be processed

The follow-up phase

This publication does not deal with how the individual school ought to tackle the decision-making process that is to ensure that the result of the self-evaluation gets translated into a desired practice. But it is important to point out that the steering group has some central tasks to perform in the follow-up phase coupling self-evaluation and action.

The steering group must ensure:

- that the target group and all involved get the total written result of the evaluation
- that, based on the self-evaluation, a common picture is formulated of the changed practice the school is working on implementing
- that responsibility, obligation to act and milestones in the action phase are agreed and made visible to all.

The steering group concludes, most important of all, its work with – within the framework given – laying down success criteria and time for evaluating the new practice.

School development – a never-ending story

School development is both a conscious and an unconscious process on an ongoing basis. The philosophy behind the described self-evaluation is that the participants through the dialogue and the shared reflections can gain a

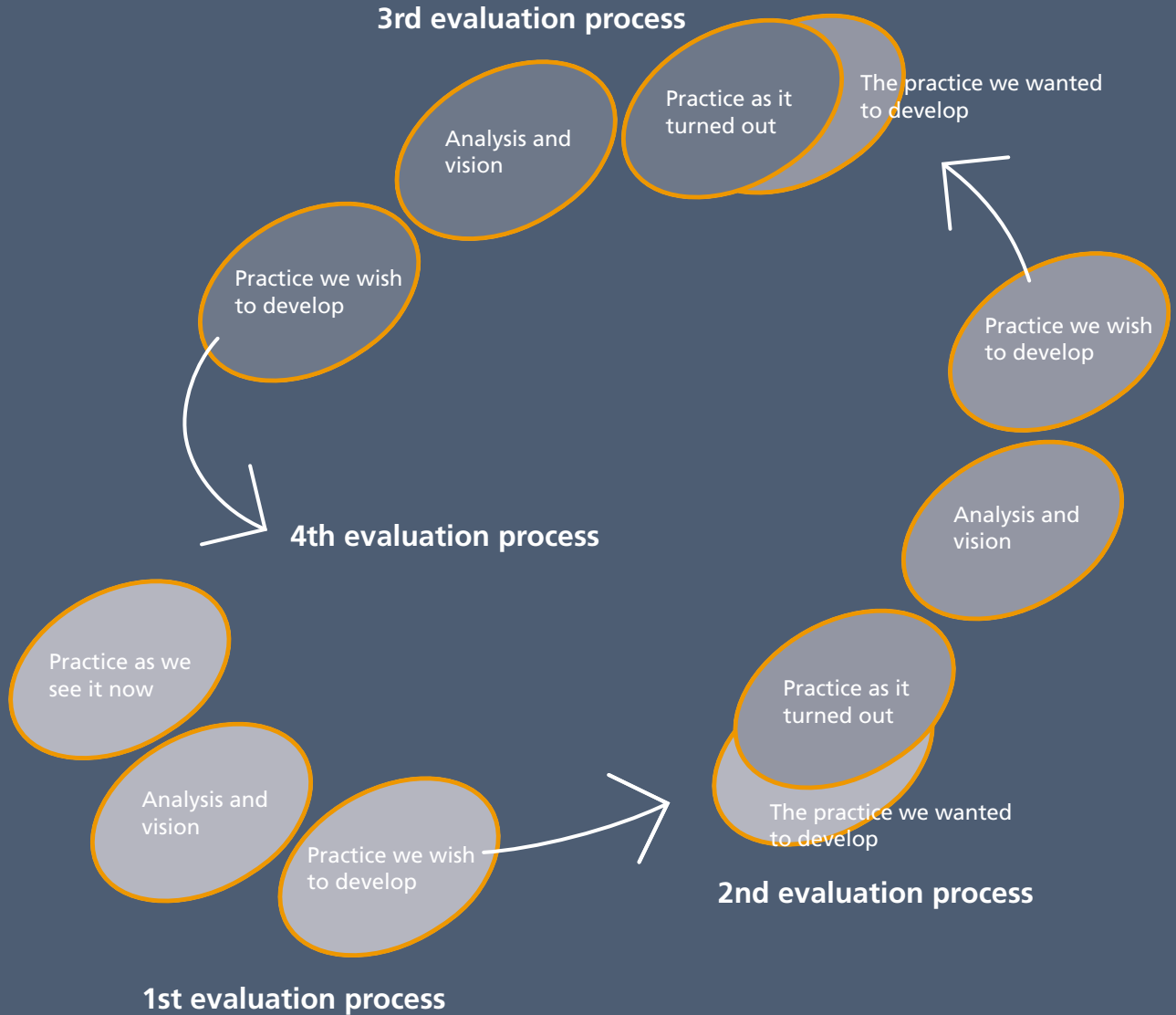
better insight in their own practice and that of others. This insight enables them to see new viewpoints in the pedagogical practice and to become co-creators of future practice.

Schools are at different stages of their development process. Some have only limited experience of working systematically with school development and common reflection. Others have years of experience of working with goals, success criteria and evaluation of various kinds.

EVA's self-evaluation model has something to contribute here, irrespective of the extent of the school's experience. Whether your school is to start from scratch or you have already come part of the way, is up to you to decide. If you are partly down the road, it might well be a good idea to start at the second evaluation process where 'practice right now' is reflected in what you had actually decided to get on with. When self-evaluation has become integrated in your school development work, the effect is that the factually realised practice will be reflected in the evaluation picture of 'future practice'. Hence, it is vital at the end of the process to have the answer to the question:

'Which aspects of our future practice must be realised in order to achieve what we set out to do?'

School development – a never-ending story



Self-evaluation EVA's experiences

If you – once you evaluate what you have started – have not achieved what you wanted, it may be because the context has changed, and you were flexible and adapted to the expectations of your surrounding ... but it could also be because you did not really persevere with what you decided to do.

EVA's experiences

The guide and model for self-evaluation used in the pilot projects were intended to make colleagues and heads reflect on the interplay between rules and value sets, culture and practice and to assess own practice and create a future workday picture.

Response from participants

In a follow-up dialogue with the participants EVA had constructive criticism about both guide and model. It was clear that the philosophy and ideas had struck home emphasising something central in the school culture – offering to the school a positive debating and reflection basis. But it was equally true to say that both guide and model were so complex that it generally was hard to cope with. By the same token the participants nevertheless had positive things to say about what the model offered.

They stress:

- that it contributed towards structuring the meetings

- that it played its part in creating a common language and a common picture of the school
- that it opened up for relevant pedagogical discussions.

Composition of groups

The self-evaluation took place in groups either composed on the basis of the professions or on a mix of these. Both forms have their strengths. The experience shows that the purely professional groups get their strength from working in depth when describing practice because they perceive it similarly within the group. On the other hand, four self-evaluation groups in a school can draw four different pictures of the same thing. This turned out to be an eye-opener and to provoke a dialogue that the school cannot ignore. The mixed groups encountered problems sparking off discussions in their group work, but the various pictures of the school do not stand out clearly to all of them, which meant that it was difficult to find a springboard for painting a common picture of the school's activities.

An intense process

The self-evaluation groups had two months to grasp the work, carry out the discussions and write a self-evaluation report. The participants experienced this as a stress factor, but they also

saw the positive aspect in it. The very intensity of the work helped create a common framework for the pedagogical discussions, which proved a much-valued product of the self-evaluation.

Focusing

The pilot evaluations developed through a dialogue with the two municipalities a very relevant but also a very broad focus. During the debriefing of the self-evaluation process it became very obvious to all involved that demarcation is a decisive factor both in terms of purpose and contents. A self-evaluation must have a focus and a few central key items – otherwise the self-evaluation stops at the analysis phase and you do not get the kick-start to changes in the practice, which is the object of the exercise.

Our impression of the importance the self-evaluation has had cannot be expressed better than Tom Tiller¹ does it in a different context: *'A thorough and professionally implemented self-evaluation gives us power through putting words and definitions on occurrences, activities and situations. We reinforce the good argument through a conscious, systematic and long-term self-evaluation. It makes us more secure and bolder in discussions with others. The self-evaluation enhances our professionalism and strengthens our self-esteem.'*

Why focus on 'unwritten rules'?

All organisations set themselves goals, create structures and undertake planning of their activities to reach their goals – just like the schools are doing it. Often, though, you see that what really is happening deviates from agreed goals and guidelines. To understand this, you need to understand what governs people's actions – also when they are part of an organisation.

Culture theory explains the phenomenon of people's actions to a great extent and that it is governed and controlled by norms, values, habits, identity and feelings. Seen from that perspective, the work of creating a common understanding, common pictures and a common language becomes an important factor in the development of an organisation.

The problem is not that norms and values are unwritten, but that the organisations do not apply this knowledge about control in their development processes as much as they apply formal rules and decisions.

¹ Tom Tiller is professor at the University of Tromsø. The quote is from some inspirational material put together in cooperation with Skolverket in Sweden.

There was a need for novel thinking when EVA for the first time had to include primary school pupils in an evaluation. Experiences from students at more advanced studies were to be coupled with the intention to find a self-evaluation method that takes into account the way children and young people think and express their thoughts.

At the same time the goal was to develop a form of future-oriented dialogue for evaluation practice in class, in the pupils' council or in the teachers' work with evaluation and quality development.

Here EVA presents a model based on experiences from the launching of two pupils' cafés, called café EVA. The idea is to give inspiration to the way schools and municipalities can use the café method as a tool for quality assurance and -development.

What is a café

A café is a place:

- where you can present and develop ideas
- and where you together can learn more

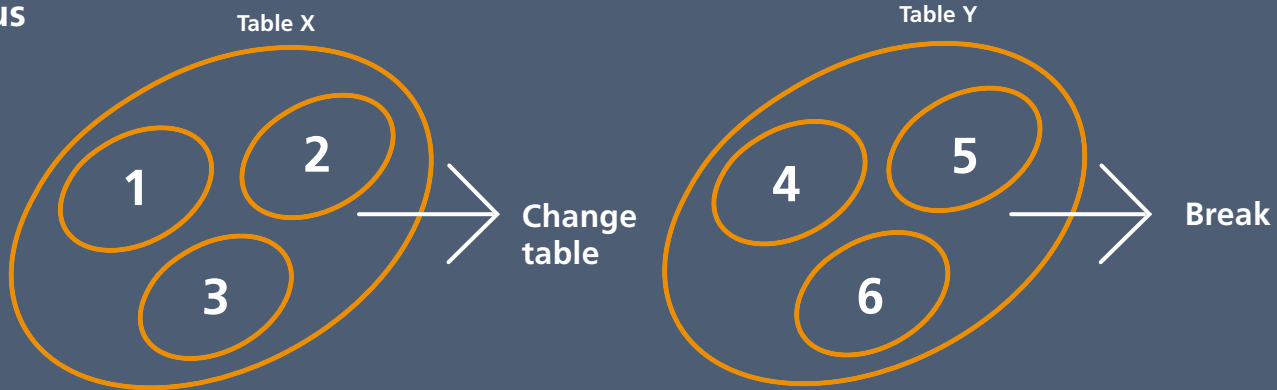
about questions to which there are no final answers, like *'what is a good school?', 'how can the teaching get better?'* and *'how can we develop the companionship?'*

The café method appeals to the imagination and creativity and makes for mutual inspiration of those taking part. The dialogue is the key, and one of the thoughts behind the method is that possibilities and solutions are found, defined and accepted jointly. The café method creates no truths, but is a good processing tool to be wielded to structure and set the framework for the dialogue.

Script and hosting

Prior to the café the host draws up a script. It describes the timetable, how the café is organised, which activities are planned and the themes to be discussed. The role of the host is as process instructor to start off the dialogue, to give those taking part a deadline for the chat they are having, to put supplementary questions – but never to come up with an answer. It is also the host's job to follow the instructions in the script, at the same time feeling

Status



Examples of themes

- 1) The best school experience
- 2) Parent and school
- 3) The school's inner and outer environment

Examples of themes

- 4) Pupils' co-determination
- 5) Class works
- 6) Teachers teamwork

The stocktaking phase

Sit at a table where you don't know anyone. Discuss **theme 1** for 15 minutes.

Stop

Discuss theme 2 for 15 minutes and write the most important thing(s) on A5-card(s) – one thing on each.

Stop

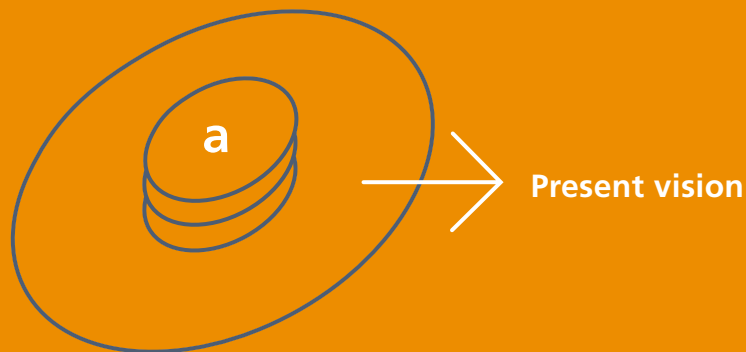
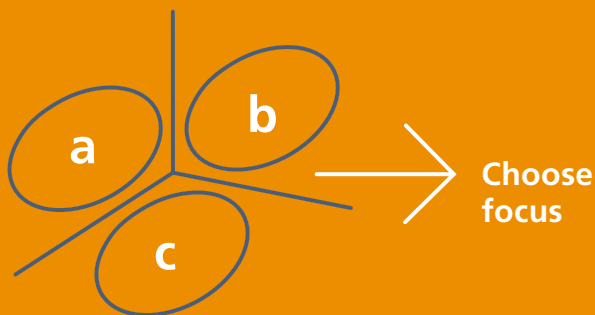
Discuss theme 3 for 20 minutes and write, once again, the most important thing(s) on A5-card(s) – one thing on each.

Hand in all cards of the group to the café host and find a new table with nobody from your old table. The process is repeated at the new table, only with new themes – and can be repeated once again.

The themes may be supported by questions, if necessary, but allowance must be made for the basic café idea and the need to be open.

In between work participants may fetch food and beverages from the café counter. After 2-3 hours the stocktaking work is complete.

Vision



Examples of focus areas

- a) Who makes decisions in the good school?
- b) How do the children and the adults work in the good school?
- c) How is the good school organised?

Vision for the focus area in picture and words and stories

The vision for 'The good school'

The vision phase

The café host distributes the cards in focus areas that cut across the themes. It might be a) 'who makes decisions in the good school?', b) 'how do the children and the adults work in the good school?' and c) 'how is the good school organised?' There could well be several focus areas.

The cards are distributed in the star drawn or taped on the floor. The café participants walk round the star, look at the cards in the various spaces and choose a focus area.

The new groups take the cards from the star and work for about 1 hour on creating the good school within their focus area. They can work with pictures, words and stories.

Each vision group has two minutes to present their vision in plenary.

Pupils' café

free to deviate from them should that be necessary.

Other ways

In the café described the theme: the good school, is split up into a number of subthemes, and all change group several times. That way many ideas and statements are tabled, and the café host ensures cohesion and the vision through his star and by establishing focus areas.

In other café models you work with one overall theme and a habitués table with its own host. From there the café guests visit other cafés, get inspiration there and return to their regular café with new ideas. That way many ideas are collected at the regular table, and the table host guarantees proper collection and cohesion.

Both methods adopt the basic idea of the café model, namely to have the knowledge and statements of many, combined through dialogue – as a basis for further insight.

The pilot project Café EVA

Café EVA was established in cooperation with headmaster Keld Rask, who has experience with staging cafés for school pupils. He and two teachers were responsible for the arrangement with practical support from EVA consultants.

To avoid too large an age spread, two pupils per intake in classes 5 – 8 took part – altogether 50 pupils. In the four hours the café lasted they were to share their experiences and pictures of their school days and come up with their own ideas on how to improve the schools.

Already in their invitation to the café the pupils were encouraged in catchword fashion to make suggestions on what could be done to improve the school day. The pupils' catchwords were sent to the café hosts. On the same day the pupils would find themselves and their ideas pinned up on the notice board in the café.

Two candles on a table

The locality is important for the café to be a success. It is vital that the participants feel welcome and appreciated. The café was set in a pleasant room where the participants could relax and feel at home. The size of the room was adapted to the number of guests, which made for a cosy and good atmosphere.

There were four – five pupils at each table with one chair for each – no more or no less. There were paper cloths on the round café tables on which pupils could draw or jot down their observations, writing materials, candles and the odd flower, and in the background soft music. There was also a worktable with cardboard,

scissors, glue, coloured felt pens etc. and a table where soft drinks, fruit, crisps and sweets were served.

The basis of the dialogue

In cooperation with Keld Rask the consultants had chosen subjects which they believed the pupils could relate to constructively, and which were as closely linked to the evaluation as possible.

The following six themes were to trigger off the pupils' dialogue:

- Class work
- Teamwork
- Pupils' council – codetermination
- School-home cooperation
- The school's physical layout
- School management.

As a guiding principle for the discussions we had each theme provided with subsidiary questions like 'what does the head do on an ordinary day?' and 'what is needed to further improve teaching?'

From school day to vision

The pupils spent the first part of the day debating in small groups of four – five persons and taking stock of their everyday school day, whereas the latter part of the day was about

thinking big and putting words on their vision for the school. At previously planned intervals the pupils were asked to change table. That way they met new faces, listened to ideas of others and exchanged views with many of the other pupils, and this way the many different dialogues in the café were knitted together. In between the café host presented the groups with new subjects and questions for discussion. In the vision phase the pupils were asked to make suggestions as to how their dream school should be and to write down the five most important things.

Documentation

Just as the pupils all along made notes of what they agreed and disagreed about, so it was the job of the café hosts to walk around among the tables listening, absorbing and writing down what went on in the many groups. The discussions, thoughts and ideas were aired and presented for the school mates, drawn on the tablecloths and written on cards that were collected by the café hosts. These cards formed the point of departure for the vision phase where the good school was created in words and pictures. Finally, the individual groups communicated their visions with plates and accounts of the good school to all café participants. The café hosts were in charge of collecting the day's documentary material. A café

Pupils' café

EVA's experiences

paper was published with texts, suggestions and pictures from the day. The participants each got a souvenir café news sheet to be taken home after a very different school day.

The café model has for the first time been used as a model for self-evaluation – and on the whole with a positive result. EVA gained two essential methodical experiences in connection with the pupils' cafés. We tested

a self-evaluation method for primary school pupils

a form of dialogue that can be used in the primary school's internal evaluation practice.

When pupils self-evaluate

The themes of the two pilot evaluations in the Middelfart and Hirtshals school authorities were generally too abstract for pupils aged 10-15. This meant that the documentation from the pupils' café could not be used to the extent expected in EVA's evaluation of the school systems. But the overall conclusion was also that it was the gap between the complexity of the evaluation and the pupils' world concept that limited the success – not form or method. It is, therefore, our belief that pupils' contribution can be used constructively in both internal and

external evaluation practice if they are confronted with a task that relates to the scholastic and social world they live in.

Dialogue

The method worked really well as dialogue form when it comes to getting the pupils to express themselves about their school life. They were good at jointly reflecting on their day-to-day school lives, and they shaped up well in terms of formulating wishes, being creative and pointing out problem areas. In other words, the pupils managed to grow wiser and to develop together.

Both for children and adults

The method can be used partially or as a whole in many different contexts. You might e.g. use the café model on a vision day for the school's pupils' council to let the class discuss both school aspects and social aspects of the school day, just as you can use the dialogue form on a cross section of the school's classes. But the café model can also be employed to organise debates of colleagues or parents on, say, pedagogics, working relations and organisation.

Model and script can be adjusted to suit the purpose, just as the café host can be internal or external according to wish or need.

From vision to practice

The café method's forte is its clear-cut focus on the open, creative and developing talk. But the method can also be used as an element in sequences or development projects aimed at concrete action plans. This, however, does mean that the dialogue phase and ideas phase are supplemented by a follow-up phase focusing on how to translate the café's thoughts into practice in the school workday. It means that the participants are to conclude agreements on which concrete initiatives the café is to produce, and which tasks those involved are being allotted in that context. To retain both intention to change and focus on who is appointed to take action, EVA recommends that the agreements be committed to paper. That way it also becomes easier to inform or to incorporate others and to reflect the new practice in what has been agreed.

Source of inspiration

Whether the café method is used alone or as a component in a larger project, EVA hopes with this to encourage and inspire future cafés in the primary school sector. You will find invitations, pupils' papers and debriefings from the cafés on EVA's home page www.eva.dk. And the article 'Dialogue makes us wiser', EVA'ning, June 2001, has Keld Rask telling you about his own experiences from working with the café method.

The philosophy behind

The café method builds on six basic assumptions which all participants will be initiated in.

They are:

- Dialogue changes things
- People can talk together
- The whole is presented in the parts
- Good solutions are good enough
- People have talent for self-organising
- We find wisdom together.

Initially we focus on reflection
- and not on action.

The method is based on the fact that the participants through dialogue and talk can achieve new awareness and on that basis create changes and development. Its primary strength is that it can create prerequisites for constructive talks. To take part in a process where an end result is not a given thing and the truth is not found can help expand the participants' picture of the world – open up new doors.

Schools and municipalities now have the possibility of using EVA's devised and tested user surveys in their quality assurance and development. In fact, EVA chose in connection with this publication to revise and publish the questionnaires used for the pilot evaluation of the primary schools at Hirtshals and Middelfart. In other words, questionnaires for a survey among parents and colleagues are available for you.

The colleagues survey

The purpose of the colleagues survey is to draw a picture of the school's activities as they appear to both colleagues and heads. The survey focuses on:

- communication
- working relations
- school development.

The questions spotlight among other things how the school's many communication channels are being used, and how colleagues and heads see the various working relations. Apart from that, the survey can help discover how the local and municipal work with school development is experienced, and which ideas and attitudes influence this work.

What can your school use it for

The colleagues survey deals primarily with the

structures that are part of the school picture. In concrete terms you can use the survey to identify strong and weak aspects of, inter alia, your team work, your work with goals and values, your practice in relation to evaluation, how you share knowledge, and what the relations between heads and colleagues are like.

The parents survey

The purpose of the survey is to make the parents answer two main questions:

- Is school-home cooperation information- or cooperation-related?
- Is there coherence between the parents' experiences, expectations and their wish to contribute?

How can your school use it

The survey can be used to learn more about how the parents experience the cooperation between school and home, and what wishes and demands they make on the school.

They get invited to the school-home cooperation at three levels. By using the survey, you will find out something about the school-home cooperation in relation to:

- the individual pupil
- the class
- the school.

A segment of reality

Quantitative surveys are neither worse nor better at describing reality than qualitative ones. But quantitative and qualitative methods each have their forte and can be used for something different. The quantitative methods can count and systematise the attitude of many, their satisfaction and wishes. Questionnaire surveys, therefore, are good at describing a segment of reality.

Signals for reflection

When EVA evaluates, the results of the questionnaire surveys never stand alone, but merge on equal terms with self-evaluations and interviews with the total documentary material. The surveys supplement the analysis with a quantitative angle. Your evaluations of the school activities will rarely be of the same size. Hence, a questionnaire survey will not always become part of the evaluation. But it is important to consider the possibility of examining an activity via a questionnaire survey – and imperative that the results are placed in the same context. Figures and percentages are not proof of truth but signals for reflection.

A tool for gaining insight

To run user surveys is not an aim in itself. The quantitative methods, clearly, cannot explain

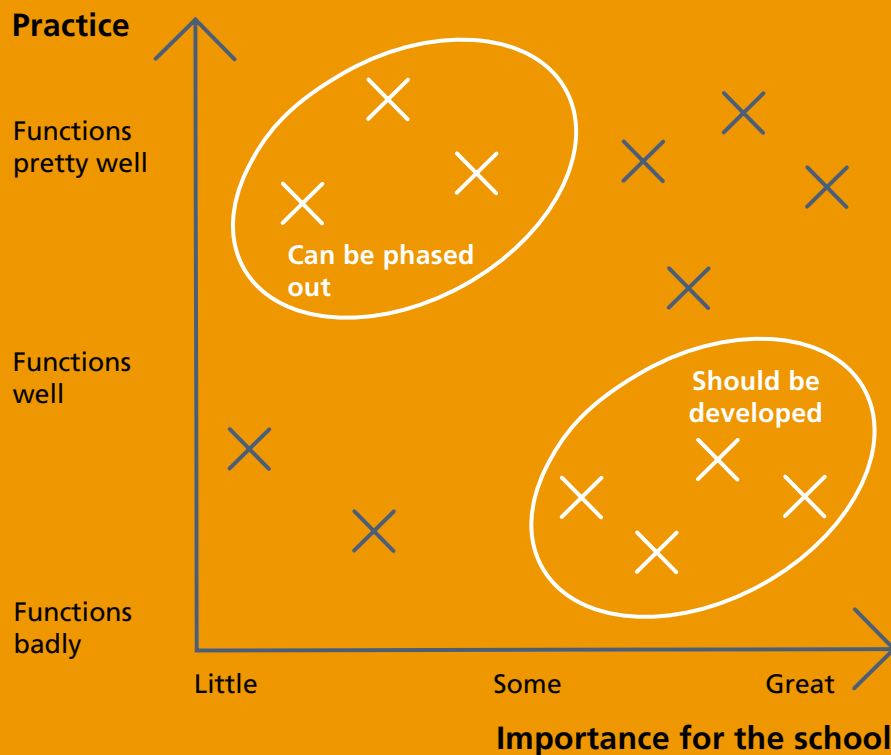
why reality looks the way it does. We need qualitative methods to analyse us through to causes and explanations. The results of quantitative surveys are thus to be seen as a tool to gain insight.

On the right track

We often have a number of assumptions as to how the respondents are going to reply. And the results of the questionnaire surveys often confirm these assumptions. But it is equally interesting to find cases where the answers differ from what we assumed. In other words, the questionnaire type of surveys can shed light on circumstances we do not know about, and attitudes we are not aware of. And they can wake us from our daydreams of assumptions.

A kick-start to school development

Both by confirming or disproving what we believe, the questionnaire-based surveys are playing their part in pointing to interesting problem areas of the theme. The surveys by questionnaire cannot deliver solutions. Their primary force is that they draw pictures of the ordinary workaday school which can act as beacons for what to concentrate on in the further school development work.



Development and phasing out

It may be an important exercise to compare the assessment of colleagues and parents of the practice with what they deem to be important. This way you may become aware of work procedures and activities in the ordinary school day which do not function in practice, but which all involved or only one party believe to be very important for the school. Then you have an example of an area where the future practice ought to be developed to match the expectations. In the same way the exercise enables you to pinpoint areas that in practice are highly prioritised, and which perhaps function admirably. But if precisely these are thought to be less important, you have an excellent basis for phasing out elements that with the passing of time have lost their value.

Questionnaires

Can there be quality in quantity

With our point of departure in the questionnaire surveys it becomes possible to identify both development and phasing out areas. With that perspective the quantitative method can contribute to qualify and justify school development, likewise the road is open for realising the idea that development requires phasing out.

The tools

The revised editions of the questionnaires can be found on EVA's homepage. From there you are free to print out the questionnaires with your own school data.

To make it more realistic for schools and municipalities to carry out surveys, EVA has developed an electronic solution where all answers can be keyed in. The program includes a built-in printer function giving you the answers in tabulated form.

You will find these tools on www.eva.dk, where you will also find the figure as a plate with associated priority diagram.

About interpretation of data

Reading and analysing numbers is a difficult discipline. Below is some advice on what to look out for when the results of a questionnaire-based survey are to be interpreted and presented to the public.

If you choose to run a random survey, e.g. among parents, you must ensure that the results are not due to coincidences. This is done by calculating significance. If you carry out a total survey, e.g. among all colleagues, you can ignore statistical uncertainties.

When the data come to hand, you tend to focus on the response percentage. But there are no fixed criteria for how high the response percentage is to be for the survey to reflect full coverage. But it is imperative to look at the person behind the answer. If e.g. gender, age and education among the respondents do not match the group of interviewees, you should be aware that the answers might not necessarily be adequate. Another element of uncertainty crops up if whole groups of respondents have omitted answering because of reasons of principle or on other grounds.

Another source of misinterpretation may be the calculation of averages. When e.g. the figures 1 to 5 as possible answers express different values, it will be statistically incorrect to calculate averages. In stead look at the weighting of positive and negative answers, note the percentages for each answer category, indicate the absolute numbers or work out the median value.

5 Through the eyes of others

To make other eyes see what you are working with can be invaluable. Many have experienced coming to another school and wondered at how differently practice is being developed. This experience can to some extent be related to the value in the external element in an evaluation. When EVA evaluates, it is a matter of external evaluation but with methods that takes into account the internal element. When a school decides to self-evaluate, the evaluation automatically has an internal character. If you see a value in others contributing to the development of your practice, you can in different ways include the external element in your evaluation process.

Experiences and ideas

In EVA's pilot evaluations the evaluation group² has been the external element. The interaction between the evaluatees and this group has shed light on a world well-known to both parties. That way the external element has helped taking on board other facets than the obvious ones. In the dialogue we had with school people at meetings and conferences all over Denmark, a number of ideas grew up to promote the external element that EVA chose to present here.

External contributions

Outsiders can make their contribution to

reflection and development by wondering, by being inquisitive and by commenting on the work done in a self-evaluation group. This may happen by way of a dialogue halfway through the procedure or at meetings where the self-evaluation report is made the subject of dialogue. The idea is that 'other minds' can help eliciting more viewpoints and then through dialogue and joint reflection open up for new possibilities. Both groups and individuals can contribute in this manner. An essential pre-condition for being opted in as an external party is that you do not offer advice, but precisely through putting questions further the evaluatee's own reflection. Beyond that it does require that you have an interest and insight in the area under evaluation.

The groups can consist of:

- colleagues from the same school
- colleagues from other schools in or outside the municipality
- other professional groups
- parents.

In the Middelfart evaluation EVA tested a model with sparring partner groups composed from a

²An evaluation group consists of persons with insight and experience of the evaluated area, e.g. teachers and primary school heads and teachers from the pedagogical field.

Through the eyes of others

cross section of disciplines and with parents taking part. Another possibility might be to include consultants or researchers with special insight in the areas evaluated or with a particular experience of the professional dialogue. One might also consider developing a model on the basis of your teamwork as outside examiners.

Something is happening ...

When others are wondering about our practice and you have to argue your choice, something happens. When you to outsiders have to explain what you consider obvious, something happens. At first, you might get provoked and get on your defensive. If you listen to other people's astonishment, it may happen that your ideas change as to what is possible. The meeting between the internal and the external partners is important and can be difficult. It needs, therefore, to be well planned and characterised by mutual respect and an understanding that none of the parties have the final answer, but that both parties have the key to changes.

Source of inspiration

With the overwhelming interest on the part of the public to look in through the school's windows it behoves us to develop methods that take on board the external element in a model that the individual school can use. If you as a start feel like reading more about evaluation groups and sparring partner groups, you will find materials on www.eva.dk in EVA's legal basis, the self-evaluation guide for Middelfart and the two reports on the pilot evaluation.