

The project Experiential Education:

Concepts and experiences at the level of context, process and outcome

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In May 1976 twelve Flemish pre-school teachers, assisted by two educational consultants, start a series of sessions with the intention to reflect critically upon their practice. Their approach is 'experiential': the intention is to make a close, moment by moment description of what it means to a young child to live and take part in the educational setting. This careful observation and 'reconstruction' of the child's experiences brings to light a series of unsatisfactory conditions. Too many opportunities to sustain children's development remain unused. During the following tens of sessions the group discusses possible solutions for the problems they meet, work them out in practice and reflect on their experiences. Gradually they begin to realise how much they have moved away from current pre-school practice. A new educational model for pre-school is taking shape: Experiential Education (EXE). It grew further to become one of the most influential educational models in the area of elementary education in Flanders and the Netherlands. From 1991 the dissemination in other European countries, including the UK, took off.

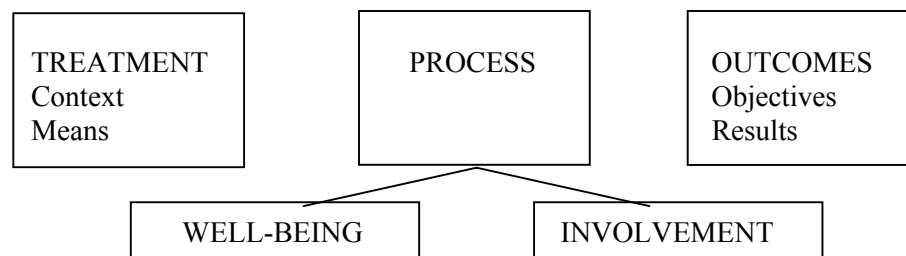
EXE offers a conceptual basis that proved to be useful in other contexts such as child care, special education, secondary education, teacher training and any kind of setting where learning and professional development is meant to take place.

In search of quality

What constitutes 'quality' in care and education? From the point of view of the parent, the counsellor, the head teacher, the curriculum developer the question is very often answered by expressing expectations with regard to the educational context and the teacher's actions: the infrastructure and equipment, the content of activities, teaching methods, teacher style... From the point of view of policy and government there is a more direct reference to the expected outcomes of education. With regular assessments the system of care and education, in a sense, is 'forced' to get better results. In the middle of this stands the practitioner, living and working with children. Wanting the best for them. Accepting sensible guidelines and accepting at the same time the fact that education has to be effective. But how to combine all those things and get the two ends - context and outcome - together?

Focusing on the process

The project Experiential Education's most important contribution answers exactly this question, by identifying indicators for quality that are situated just in the middle of the two approaches. It points to the missing link: the concept that helps us to sense if what we are doing (the context) is leading to somewhere (the outcome)!



The basic insight within the EXE-theory is that the most economic and conclusive way to assess the quality of any educational setting (from the pre-school level to adult education) is to focus on two dimensions: the degree of 'emotional well-being' and the level of 'involvement'.

When we want to know how each of the children is doing in a setting, we first have to explore the degree in which children do feel at ease, act spontaneously, show vitality and self-confidence. All this indicates that their emotional well-being is ok. and that their physical needs, the need for tenderness and affection, the need for safety and clarity, the need for social recognition, the need to feel competent and the need for meaning in life and moral value are satisfied.

The second criterion is linked to the developmental process and urges the adult to set up a challenging environment favouring involvement.

Good schools have to succeed on both tasks: only paying attention to emotional well-being and a positive climate is not enough, while efforts to enhance involvement will only have an impact if children and students feel at home and are free from emotional constraints.

Involvement, the key word

The concept of involvement refers to a dimension of human activity. Involvement is not linked to specific types of behaviour nor to specific levels of development. Both the baby in the cradle playing with his voice and the adult trying to formulate a definition, both the (mentally) handicapped child and the gifted student, can share that quality. Csikszentmihayli (1979) speaks of "the state of flow".

One of the most predominant characteristics of this flow state is concentration. An involved person is narrowing his attention to one limited circle. Involvement goes along with strong motivation, fascination and total implication: there is no distance between person and activity, no calculation of the possible benefits. Because of that, time perception is distorted (time passes by rapidly). Furthermore there is an openness to (relevant) stimuli and the perceptual and cognitive functioning has an intensity, lacking in activities of another kind. The meanings of words and ideas are felt more strongly and deeply. Further analysis reveals a manifest feeling of satisfaction and a bodily felt stream of positive energy. The 'state of flow' is sought actively by people. Young children find it most of the time in play.

Of course, one could describe a variety of situations where we can speak of satisfaction combined with intense experience, but not all of them would match our concept of involvement. Involvement is not the state of arousal easily obtained by the entertainer. The crucial point is that the satisfaction stems from one source: the exploratory drive, the need to get a better grip on reality, the intrinsic interest in how things and people are, the urge to experience and figure out. Only when we succeed in activating the exploratory drive do we get the intrinsic type of involvement and not just involvement of an emotional or functional kind.

Finally, involvement only occurs in the small area in which the activity matches the capabilities of the person, that is in the 'zone of proximal development'.

To conclude: involvement means that there is intense mental activity, that a person is functioning at the very limits of his or her capabilities, with an energy flow that comes from intrinsic sources. One couldn't think of any condition more favourable to real development. If we want deep level learning, we cannot do without involvement.

Measuring involvement

However much involvement may seem to be a subjective property, it is very well possible to assess in a reliable way the levels of involvement in children and adults. For this the "Leuven Involvement Scale" (LIS) has been developed, encompassing seven variants for different

settings, ranging from childcare to adult education.

The LIS is a 5-point rating scale. At level 1, there is no activity. The child is mentally absent. If we can see some action it is a purely stereotypic repetition of very elementary movements. Level 2 doesn't go further than actions with many interruptions. At level 3, we can without a doubt label the child's behaviour as an activity. The child is doing something (e.g. listening to a story, making something with clay, experimenting in the sand table, interacting with others, writing, reading, finishing a task...). But we miss concentration, motivation and pleasure in the activity. In many cases the child is functioning at a routine level. In level 4 moments of intense mental activity occur. At level 5 there is total involvement expressed by concentration and absolute implication. Any disturbance or interruption would be experienced as a frustrating rupture of a smoothly running activity.

The core of the rating process consists of an act of empathy in which the observer has to get into the experience of the child, in a sense has to become the child. This gives the information to draw conclusions concerning the mental activity of the child and the intensity of his experience. Despite of the required observational skills, the inter-scorer reliability of the LIS-YC (a comparison between two observers) is .90 and thus very satisfactory.

Research with the Leuven Involvement Scale has shown that the levels of involvement within a setting tend to be more or less stable (Laevers, 1994). They are the result of the interactions between the context (including the way teachers handle their group) and the characteristics of the children. We can expect that the more competent the teacher, the higher the level of involvement can be, given a particularly composed group of children. We find indications for this in our own research, but also in the large scale Effective Early Learning project in the UK, where more than 3.000 adults learned to use the scale and more than 30.000 children at the pre-school age have been observed with it (Pascal & Bertram, 1995; Pascal et al., 1998).

Raising the levels of well-being and involvement

The concepts of well being and involvement are not only useful for research purposes, but at least as much for practitioners who want to improve the quality of their work. Capitalising on a myriad of experiences by teachers, a body of expertise has been gathered and systematised in *The Ten Action Points*, an inventory of ten types of initiatives that favour well-being and involvement (Laevers & Moons, 1997).

THE TEN ACTION POINTS

1. Rearrange the classroom in appealing corners or areas
2. Check the content of the corners and replace unattractive materials by more appealing ones
3. Introduce new and unconventional materials and activities
4. Observe children, discover their interests and find activities that meet these orientations
5. Support ongoing activities through stimulating impulses and enriching interventions
6. Widen the possibilities for free initiative and support them with sound rules and agreements
7. Explore the relation with each of the children and between children and try to improve it
8. Introduce activities that help children to explore the world of behaviour, feelings and values
9. Identify children with emotional problems and work out sustaining interventions
10. Identify children with developmental needs and work out interventions that engender involvement within the problem area.

The action points cover a wide range of interventions. In AP1, 2 and 3 the organisation of the space and the provision of interesting materials and activities is at stake. With AP4, the teacher is invited to observe carefully how children interact with all that they encounter in their environment in order to identify interests that can be met by a more targeted offer of activities. It is on this track that open projects come to life. They gradually take shape building upon what children indicate as points of interest in their responses to a former offer.

The realisation of a rich environment doesn't stop with the provision of a wide variety of potentially interesting materials and activities. A decisive element in the occurrence of involvement is the way the adult supports the ongoing activities with stimulating interventions (AP5) which are part of an effective adult style.

Using the dynamics in children and their exploratory drive requires an open form of organisation that stimulates children to take initiative (AP6). That is why in EXE-settings, children are free to choose between a wide range of activities (up to about 65 % of the available time). This point includes the setting of rules that guarantee a smoothly running class organisation and a maximum of freedom for every child (and not only for the fittest and the most assertive ones). It takes months to get this far with a group of children. But the efforts to implement this open form are rewarded. Research indicates that - given a rich offer - the more children can choose their activities, the higher the levels of involvement.

In AP7 the field of social relations is addressed. The adult not only explores the relations between the children, but also tries to be aware of how she/he is experienced by children. Guidelines in this area encompass qualities already defined by Carl Rogers (empathy and authenticity). At the group level explicit attention is given to the creation of opportunities to share experiences and build a positive group climate.

In AP8 activities are generated that support the exploration of feelings, thoughts and values. In a sense it is a promotion of psychology as a field of competence, but of course at the level of young children. One of the materials supporting the development of social cognition, is the *Box Full of Feelings*. The series of open-ended activities linked to the set helps children to develop emotional intelligence and social competence. The effect has been reported by Nanette Smith, finishing a dissertation on this subject, on a BBC programme for practitioners: "We've only used the *Box Full of Feelings* for seven weeks. Already we've seen a big, significant difference. (-) we can sense a general feeling of protectiveness, awareness, friendship and empathy in the children which wasn't there before." (Kog, Moons & Depondt, 1997).

Children who need special attention

AP1 to 8 have a general character: they lay the foundations. The two remaining action points turn our attention to children needing special attention because they do not reach the levels of well-being and involvement that we strive for. In the first (AP9) we deal with behavioural and emotional problems: children who, through all kinds of circumstances, do not succeed in realising a satisfying interaction with their environment, who come under pressure and lose contact with their inner stream of experiences. On the basis of a large number of case studies, an experiential strategy has been developed to help them. Interventions that proved effective range from "giving positive attention and support" to "giving security by structuring time and space".

The last action point (AP10) is about children with special developmental needs. We define them as children that fail to come to activity in which the quality of 'involvement' is realised in one or more areas of competence. This means that their development is endangered and chances are real that they will not develop the potential they have in them.

An experiential teacher style

Teacher interventions can vary a lot, depending on the nature of activities or on the responses and initiatives of children. Nevertheless, we can discern individual patterns in the way one intervenes in a wide variety of situations. The notion of 'style' is used to grasp this pattern.

The 'Adult Style Observation Schedule' (ASOS) is built around three dimensions: stimulation, sensitivity and giving autonomy (Laevers, Bogaerts & Moons, 1997).

Stimulating interventions are open impulses that engender a chain of actions in children and

make the difference between low and high involvement. Such as: suggesting activities to children that wander around, offering materials that fit in an ongoing activity, inviting children to communicate, confronting them with thought-provoking questions and giving them information that can capture their mind.

Sensitivity is evidenced in responses that witness empathic understanding of the basic needs of the child, such as, the need for security, for affection, for attention, for affirmation, for clarity and for emotional support.

Giving autonomy is not only realised in the open form of organisation but has to be implemented as well at the level of interventions. It means: to respect children's sense for initiative by acknowledging their interests, giving them room for experimentation, letting them decide upon the way an activity is performed and when a product is finished, implicate them in the setting of rules and the solution of conflicts.

Once we begin to look at the way adults interact with children we realise how powerful these dimensions are. In view of getting high levels of well being and involvement the person of the teacher is even more important than other dimensions of the context, such as the space, the material and the activities on offer.

The Process-Oriented Child Monitoring System

To identify children who need special attention systematic observation is necessary and, in fact, one or another kind of monitoring system. Although the traditional product-oriented systems have their value, especially for diagnostic purposes, they also have serious limitations. The first is that using them at a group level leads to an enormous investment, leaving no time for real interventions. Further, most systems concentrate on typical academic achievements and do forget that success is often more dependent on learning dispositions. Finally, having discovered where a child stands does not mean one knows immediately which actions to take. The paradigm behind most monitoring systems seems to be that one just has to break down the task further to help the child overcome the gap. But this approach doesn't take the nature of developmental processes into account and that the child functions as a whole.

Totally in consistence with the EXE-framework, the Process-oriented Monitoring System (the POMS) focuses onto the two major indications for the quality of the educational process: well being and involvement. These give the answer to the essential question: how is each child doing? Are the efforts we make sufficient to secure emotional health and real development in all-important areas and for each of the children? In a first step, children are screened, with a five-point scale for each of the dimensions. For children falling below level 4, teachers proceed with further observations and analysis. A periodic assessment (3 or 4 times a year) of these levels has shown to be practicable and effective. In contrast to other systems, the POMS gives a sense of purpose: teachers get immediate feedback about the quality of their work and can get to work without delay. The target being to evoke enjoyment and more intrinsic motivated action within the fields of development that are at stake (Laevers, 1997).

The concept of deep level learning

In the EXE-theoretical framework, a lot of attention is paid to the effects or outcomes of education. The concept of 'deep level learning', expresses the concern for a critical approach of educational evaluation. Central to this is the questioning of superficial learning, learning that does not affect the basic competencies of the child and has little transfer to real life situations. In line with a constructivist tradition, we don't see the process of development as a mere addition of discrete elements of knowledge or aptitudes to an existing repertoire. On the contrary: every performance is depending on an underlying structure of fundamental schemes. These operate as basic programmes that regulate the way we process incoming stimuli and construct reality. By them we interpret new situations and we act competently - or not. They determine which and

how many dimensions of reality can be articulated in ones perception and cognition (Laevers, 1995 & 1998).

The ongoing research programme, in which instruments are developed to assess levels of development, covers five areas of development: (1) physical knowledge; (2) psycho-social cognition; (3) communication and expression; (4) creativity and (5) self-organisation.

In this context the exploration of forms of intelligence based on intuitive faculties, as opposed to the logical-mathematical intelligence, gets special attention. Real understanding of the world is built on the capacity to get the feel of it. Consequently, the difference in competence between people, in any profession that requires a certain level of understanding, is made by their intuitive view on the matter. This is the case for physicists, medical doctors, biologists, geologists, engineers... but also in any craft where routine and technique is to be transcended and interpretations have to be made. This also holds for the field of psychosocial cognition. Intuition is the core of the expertise in professions where dealing with people plays an important role, such as, child care, teaching, all kinds of therapies, human resources management, advertising and of course in all the sciences connected to these. This domain is one of the most fascinating ones and can be seen as one of the challenges for educational research in the next century.

Value education

Within the EXE-project the concept of 'linkedness' is the expression of the deep concern for the development of a positive orientation towards reality. It offers a point of reference for the whole of value education.

Linkedness with the eco-system in its entirety is essentially a religious concept, in the broadest sense of the word. Ethymologically, 're-ligion' (re-liare) means 'linking again'. As "delinquency" means "the lack of being linked", the sense of 'connectedness' can be seen as the cornerstone of prevention of criminal behaviour or any action that brings damage to things and people. One who feels connected with something would not act as a vandal.

In the elaboration of the concept at the level of pre-school education, children are helped to develop this attitude of linkedness with (1) themselves, (2) the other(s), (3) the material world, (4) society and (5) the ultimate unity of the entire eco-system.

A question of energy

Experiences accumulated in the EXE project support the conclusion that well being and involvement, are welcomed by teachers as most stimulating and helpful to improve the quality of their work. The concepts of well being and involvement match the intuitions of many teachers and give them a scientifically-based confirmation of what they knew already: when we can get children in that 'flow state', development must and will take place within the area(s) addressed by the activity. In contrast to effect variables – the real outcomes are only seen on the longer run – the process variables give immediate feedback about the quality of (planned) interventions and tell us on the spot something about the potential impact. Furthermore, putting forward involvement as key indicator for quality, engenders a lot of positive energy and synergy: the enthusiastic responses of children, when teaching efforts are successful, are very empowering and give the teacher deep satisfaction both at the professional and personal level. Finally, taking involvement as a point of reference in the guidance of professionals makes it possible to respect the actual level of functioning of the teacher and the setting. For the implementation of experiential education, one starts where one stands, with the room, the children, the material, the books, the methods and all the limitations linked to the actual situation. Then a field of action is chosen and initiatives are taken that have the potential to bring about an increase in well being and/or involvement. This increase – even how small it may be - is experienced as a success and drives one towards new initiatives.

That is what experiential education is about: exploiting and enhancing the energy in people and bringing them into a positive spiral that engenders deep level learning in the child... and in the adult!

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Practice oriented publications from the Centre for Experiential Education available in English:

- Laevers, F., (Ed.), (1994) *The Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children. Manual and video*. (44 pp – 40 min.).
[A training video with 27 fragments with full description of situations and commented scores]
- Laevers, F. & Moons, J. (1997). *Enhancing well being and involvement in children. An introduction in the ten action points*. (30 min.)
[A video based on more than 100 slides with English spoken comment.]
- Laevers, F., M. Bogaerts & J. Moons, J. (1997). *Experiential Education at Work. A setting with 5-year olds*. Video & Manual. (71pp / 23min)
[A video-impression with a guide to analyse the sequences from the point of view of adult style, the ten action points and the developmental domains.]
- M. Kog, J. Moons & L. Depondt (1997). *A Box full of Feelings. A playset for children from 3 to 8*.
[A case with 4 posters, 4 little cases, 48 situational pictures, finger puppets, a set of worksheets to be copied and a manual describing more than 20 different activities]
- Laevers, F., Vandenbussche E., Kog, M., & Depondt, L. (1997). *A process-oriented child monitoring system for young children*. Leuven: Centre for Experiential Education. (129 pp)
[A manual covering 3 stages, from group screening to interventions, with 8 forms to support all

the process and ideas for interventions]

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