

Innovating and implementing Travelling along two tracks simultaneously ¹

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Introduction

It is not difficult to try out an innovation. An enthusiastic school or a childcare centre wanting to learn something new can easily be found, with professionals open to experiments and a management ready for a challenge in the field of innovation.

However, transferring and disseminating an innovation from these early innovators, these initiating centres and schools, onwards to the whole sphere of action - that is often quite a job. Many child care provider institutions and professionals do not readily welcome yet another change or yet another method.

In this paper we will explore innovation and implementation as two tracks to go down simultaneously. Our experiences from the “Parents and Diversity” project will serve as examples.

Problem exploring – the question of the separate tracks

One of the problems concerning the implementing of an innovation is that target groups often do not recognize the importance of the innovation, or resist it. The target groups have not been through the process of innovation, they have missed out on the process of brainstorming, thinking along, experimenting, and gaining insight. The innovation suddenly hits them like something from outer space; they have no influence on the nature of the innovation.

There might be something wrong with the idea of drawing a line between the development of an innovation and dissemination of the results, between the invention of a change and the implementation of its proceeds. Distinguishing between knowledge producers (scientists, developers) and knowledge users (teachers, group educators and managers) is uncalled-for

The Rogers model that distinguishes innovation, implementation strategy, and the child care provider institution introducing the innovation, may be used as a framework, but practice shows that strategies and child care provider institutions vary largely (Klazinga, 2003; Rogers, 1995). Large investments generally go into innovating; less goes into transfer and dissemination.

The project ‘Partnership between parents and professionals’ is an action-training project carried out in 13 child care centres throughout The Netherlands and monitored by an evaluation research that was set up to support the methodological approach and to chart the effects of the action-training project.

The project aims at improving the communication and cooperation between parents and professionals in child care centres and primary schools. Today, partnership between parents and professionals is recognized as an important aspect of institutional quality. However, in current practice, this pedagogical partnership is not self-evident. Communication between professionals and parents can often be characterized as one-way traffic. Turning the scale towards a more equal exchange sets new challenges for professionals as well as parents. Moreover, parents have different social and ethnic backgrounds, differences in pedagogical style, and interests and status positions may all interfere with the communication process. Coping with this many-faceted diversity challenges the professionals to improve mutual relations.

The project makes use of the following approaches and inputs:

- approach of the European DECET network
- approach parental roles: living together, acting together, thinking together, deciding together.
- workshops
- european exchange visits



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- instruments for professionals
- implementation strategies for providers.

The project uses a model of participatory innovation which considers all staff and parents as competent contributors to the innovation process, and which focusses on innovation and implementation as two parallel processes instead of as two consecutive processes. This model enhances the interaction between 'top and bottom' and between 'intern and extern' participants.

Besides, top-down introduction of academic knowledge into practice has limitations that have been recognized over the past few years; empirical knowledge by professionals and a link with the specific child care provider institution's dynamics are also important components.

Simultaneous combining of innovation and implementation offers good opportunities when it comes to avoiding impediments to implementation. It comes down to laying foundations for implementation during the innovation phase itself.

Example from practice

An example of a project in which the dilemma of separate tracks for innovation and implementation was addressed from the beginning onwards is 'Parents and Diversity' (2003-2005). The factors for success in two projects served as examples: the project Pedagogic Renewal at the NIZW (Dutch Institute for Care and Wellbeing) childcare centre (van Dijke en Terpstra, 1998) and the Kinderwelten project in Berlin (Preissing, Wagner, 2003). The participative innovation method was the centre point in the project 'Pedagogic Renewal' between 1998 and 2000. At the same time it focused on the process of innovation and implementation, and on the development of the product. The professionals' impact on innovative methods and products, and a large supportive social basis were success factors from the beginning onwards, leading to high motivation and large national impact.

Not only professionals were involved in the innovation process in the development project 'Kinderwelten' between 2001 and 2003 in Berlin right from the beginning; the project also involved all the other relevant stakeholders: policy-making officials with the city council, professional training colleges and immigrant organizations. This resulted in a broad consensus on the importance of the project, and led to its mainstreaming and permanent establishment as official policy with the authorities and the child care provider institutions involved.

The lessons learnt from these projects were taken into account in 'Parents and Diversity': during the innovation phase, implementation was addressed at the same time.

Constructing together: determining the route together

An innovation route could be seen as a journey with participative innovation for a starting point: all the parties involved exercise influence on determining the route (Terpstra, van Dijke, Ligtermoet, unpub). Participative innovation is based on the idea that directly involved parties (in this case coordinators, educators and teachers communicating with the parents) have the competence to cooperate: their experience, their ideas and propositions have an impact on the final composition of the project (method, policy). Together, professionals at the child care provider institution and external experts build on innovation and decide on the route.

Participative innovation is about constructing new knowledge together, about combining external knowledge (academic viewpoints, other projects) with internal knowledge, available from the pilot child care centres. In order to illustrate how to build innovation together, the 'Parents and Diversity' project made use of the motto 'Walker, there is no road, we make the road by walking'.

There was a common denominator shared by all the pilot child care centres participating in the project 'Parents and Diversity': a common travelling goal called 'Parents as partners', a compass with



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diversity targets for guidelines and a map on which the model Living Together, Acting Together, Thinking Together, Deciding Together had a central position.

The national 'Parents and Diversity' project introduced these frameworks and themes; they served as guidelines for all the pilot child care centres, aiming to build a partnership with parents.

Top-down and bottom-up

Apart from this top-down approach the innovation route also connects with the actual situation on the pilot child care centres, with the ongoing processes in practice and the processes that go on after the project has been ended. This bottom-up approach constructs knowledge from practice within the job - it just hasn't been made explicit yet.

This type of empirical knowledge is complementary to the external (academic) knowledge; it recognizes the importance of the contribution of all parties involved. (Klazinga, 2003)

The newly introduced knowledge generally has an inspiring effect and raises levels of consciousness and insight; besides, professionals gain recognition and empowerment from making that their knowledge explicit. (Weijenberg, 2004)

For 'Parents and Diversity' every pilot child care centre set their own SMART targets (Specific, Measurable, Acceptable, Realistic, Time related) ² based on the framework and vision of the national project. These SMART targets were linked to the situation and processes within the child care provider institution itself. During the running time of the project, the professionals worked on the targets they had set themselves. Thus, the innovation was linked to the development of the child care provider institution itself; it had a broadening effect and was generally not considered as an extra workload. Below is an example of a made-to-fit target with a link to the following diversity targets: "recognizing every aspect of your identity" and "participating as active citizen", connected in their turn to "thinking together".

From one of the pilot child care centres 'Parents and Diversity':

"At our child care provider institution, 50% of the parents are migrants, but there are very few migrants on the parents' committee. We want to increase their input.

" Our target is to increase the input of migrant parents on the central parents' board as well as on the local parents' committees." (Weijenberg 2004)

Thus, the target set by this childcare provider institution is to reflect diversity in every level and part of the organization.

Compass and route map

Work with the diversity targets scheme and the 'Living, acting thinking and deciding together' scheme provides support and guiding. Internal analysis also brings the child care provider institution's weak points to light: what has worked well so far? What do we need to work on? Where are the blank spots? An example of working with these schemes: "First we check the category we are at the moment; we distinguish several categories: living together, acting together, thinking together, deciding together. Categories vary from centre to centre. At some of the centres we note high parental involvement: there are enough individual contacts between educators and parents. The category Living Together is fine, but there is no Thinking Together. Parents are not represented on parents' committees for example. In other centres the situation is exactly opposite. Parents think about pedagogical policy issues on the parents' committees, but Living Together – having coffee in the classroom, coming along on a class excursion – has not become effective yet."

A general framework provides support and guiding, it acts as a compass and a route map, it links onto the process per centre or per team and provides motivation and a supportive social base.

Supportive social base: travel stories and more travellers

Participative innovation also means that those indirectly involved – non-executive professionals such as the managers – have a task with regard to innovation and implementation. Fundamental innovation requires work at every level. Attention is paid to "how", but also to creating a supportive social base and to acceptance of new viewpoints. That is why it is crucial to involve as many parties as possible.



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An exchange between internals (participants on 'Parents and Diversity') and externals (external experts on the advisory council and at work conferences) is brought about by this broad base strategy.

Internal parties:

- Practitioners: educators, teachers and middle management experiment with innovative methods. In 'Parents and Diversity' the professionals on the participating pilot child care centres construct and evaluate new methods via workshops. They put the methods into practice.
- Management: their job is to structure and to establish the innovation; dissemination within the child care provider institution. Management at the childcare child care provider institutions that participate in the project (managing 20-125 child care centres) set up internal work groups in order to follow the project process and to prepare its establishment and implementation in the child care provider institution. The internal work groups consist of representatives of middle and higher management and pedagogical staff. In less than a year after 'Parents and Diversity' started, knowledge from participating pilot child care centres spread to other centres within the child care provider institution, under a snowball effect.
- Policy: vision and framework elaboration; development or readjustment of parental policy. During the last year of the project 'Parents and Diversity' the pedagogical staff linked the project viewpoints to their own child care provider institution's policy.

External parties:

- Developers: introduce innovative input. As a developer, Bureau MUTANT introduces the substantive framework and propagates new points of view and methods via workshops and project team meetings. The innovating ideas stem from (academic) literature or other national or international projects. The European network DECET is a large source for inspiration.
- Universities: introduction of research, research knowledge.
- Social and political: the innovation 'partnership with parents': where is the connection with other relevant social and political developments and policy itineraries? In this respect we mention the influence of the new Law on Childcare in The Netherlands that gives parents the right to advise.

Relevant stakeholders from the world of science and social organizations are involved in the project 'Parents and Diversity' via invitational conferences and the establishment of an advisory council.

Two tracks simultaneously

The pilot child care centres immediately share all newly constructed knowledge and points of view with the field. This provides the inspiration to start up processes within and outside one's own organization. Because of their work on implementation right from the start, through the dissemination of knowledge and insight, very different parties, such as mentioned above, are able to contribute to the innovation process.

By involving as many relevant parties as possible in the innovation process, implementation takes place simultaneously.

Active involvement in development brings about substantive deepening and a supportive social base at the same time. By travelling along two tracks simultaneously, innovation becomes implementation and implementation becomes innovation.

Change strategies: vehicles

Different vehicles can be used for the process of change as a journey. For change process support we use the change models repartition by de Caluwé (de Caluwé, 2003) presenting five different



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approaches, each of them with its own frame of mind and its own theories. De Caluwé distinguishes five types of thinking each with a central question:

- Yellow print thinking: how to bring different interests together? Creating a social base and negotiating interests are crucial here.
- Blue print thinking: how to reach results? Central characteristics are rational thinking and fixing goals in advance.
- Red print thinking: how to make adequate use of human resource-instruments? Intrinsic motivation, communication and teamconstructing are crucial here.
- Green print thinking: how to learn to learn? The concept of the learning organization, changing = learning, a direct relation between thinking and acting is central.
- White print thinking: what is the run of the natural course, the process? The motto could be: we make the road by walking. Change that develops autonomously, its limited predictability, experiments and evolution are central here.

The change strategy, used in the 'Parents and Diversity' project and at the pilot child care centres, is different per phase, but also per child care provider institution. The starting phase of the national project made use of white and green print thinking: experimenting and learning. The metaphor of the project as a journey, and the motto: "Walker, there is no road, we make te road by walking" are typical examples of white print thinking. The project began with an outline and open targets, necessary for participative innovation, i.e. a combination of bottom-up and top-down approach.

During a later phase, the national project also made use of blue print thinking: formulating measurable SMART targets.

Conductors as change agents

In order to lend support to the learning and experimental (green and white) aspect of change, the project handles the following approach. The innovation process in the childcare centre starts out at one or two pilot child care centres. Together with the local project leader (generally a pedagogical staff member at central level) the pilot centres participate in the national project. The local project educators play a key role: at their child care provider institutions they are responsible for coaching the selected centres and for further implementation in the child care provider institution's policy. These project educators are like train conductors. They accompany the passengers on the train but also provide information at the station. In fact, they are everywhere. (Van Keulen, Doeleman, 2005) Per participating site, the executive manager (centre manager) and a few professionals are actively involved in the project. They attend different national workshops and provide documentation and reporting.

One of the project educators: "I find our method successful. A number of educators attend national workshops where they reflect on and learn about different issues and methods. They then get going in the three pilot centres. Each in their own tempo. Together, they increase their knowledge and consciousness, they think of spearheads and observe their own attitude and skills. As professionals, they are the instruments"

Klazinga emphasizes the importance of the professional's role as a change agent too. The professional is the very best person to put different forms of knowledge to use in his/her practice, and to organize the practice in such a way that new knowledge is admitted. (Klazinga, 2003)

An important characteristic of the approach followed is that small means have long reaches.

The professionals transfer to their teams what they were taught at the workshops. They provide the same exercises, watch the same video, do homework assignments per team, to be discussed during a later workshop This approach challenges the professionals' competences. A successful cascade stage transfer depends on the professionals' competence to transfer the knowledge and exercises to the other team members. This is not always possible and requires extra attention at the start of new projects, either as selection criteria, or as extra training in skills.



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Travel experiences – Examples in child care centres

How to hold on to a change, how to establish and mainstream a change – these central questions come up at the beginning of innovation projects. It is no different in this project. The participating childcare child care provider institutions are now implementing project results in their own organizations. (van Keulen, 2005).

- Permanent establishment of what participating centres have learnt. Holding on to the results at individual and central level, with regard to results such as educators' changed attitudes, increase of communication between educators and parents, and increase of parental input.
- Disseminating and broadening from 1 or 2 pilot centres onwards to other centres within the child care provider institution. The participating pilot sites have been through an intensive process. How to spread the benefits to other sites within the child care provider institution? How to introduce the 'Parents and Diversity' theme to the teams?
- Permanent establishment within the childcare centre policy. How to establish the results of the project as pedagogical and parental policy within the child care provider institution?

Each child care provider institution participating in the project keeps up with their own change process and follow their own policy. With regard to how different child care provider institutions implement project results, there are many different answers. In order to demonstrate different strategies we provide a few examples from different child care provider institutions.

- Common interests and reward

One of the childcare provider institutions' goals is to combine the interests of the parents as clients, with the vision of parents as pedagogical partners. The theory is that an improvement of pedagogical partnership between parents and child care provider institutions improves the relationship with the parents. In order to reach this target, as many educators and managers as possible should be trained and coached in the project "Duet with the Parents". Professionals can register for this internal project. Schooling consists of carrying out several assignments in practice: in their own team, with individual parents and with a group of parents. The contents of the course were developed by the pedagogical staff worker who participated as project leader on the project 'Parents and Diversity'. The contents of the course reflect the project: use of methods such as intercultural communication and culture shock, the method of the Family Wall and the use of training instruments practiced during the project (training packages)³. The course, including the practice assignments, has its place in the personnel's rewarding system. The result is that over a short period a large number of professionals (educators and managers) became acquainted and practiced with ideas on pedagogical partnership with parents.

- The snowball approach

Another dissemination method is the snowball method. The participating centres manager organizes different internal (very visual) presentations at the monthly manager meeting or the central parents' committee's meeting. As a consequence, several managers will request more workshops or presentations at their own centres and within their own teams. As a consequence, a circle of centres is built around the participating pilot centre; these new centres will also set to work with 'Parents and Diversity'. In time, several teams' enthusiasm will make this snowball larger and larger. Upon transfer to new centres, the insights and instruments developed in 'Parents and Diversity' will be made use of again.

The snowball also concerns the parents' committee. The chairman to the central parents' committee participated in one of the European exchange visits and began creating a supportive social base in order to have more migrant parents on the parents' committee and the parents council.

In order to get the different elements established as central policy, the pedagogical staff worker (also project leader 'Parents and Diversity') is renewing parental policy based on the project and its results. The project leader: "Diversity & parental involvement as a theme are becoming viable, as well



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as the idea that children and parents are inextricably bound to each other. We have stopped saying: “ child care is working with children”. We now say:” childcare is working with children and their parents”.

- Systematic and binding

Another example concerns an child care provider institution that, over a number of years, has systematically been working with diversity policy. The appointed steering committee initiates diversity issues at different levels and with different means. Examples:

- Extra training for every personnel member (educators, middle management and higher management).
- Developing a varied offer in childcare, reflecting diversity.
- Setting up a platform on diversity issues in which educators exchange experiences and ideas, to keep the fire going and to work on policy establishment.
- Integrating diversity issues within the pedagogical quality system, so that diversity counts as an item at annual monitoring sessions.

The steering group has actively addressed the project ‘Parents and Diversity’ (the project leader ‘Parents and Diversity’ is on the steering group). They have developed a course and readjusted present parental policy.

All the centres in this child care provider institution are committed to participate in trainings and platforms. Diversity policy implies that all parties involved have to make the effort.

- Joint forces in one province

In the province of Noord-Brabant two childcare centres and the Provincial Resource Centre cooperate in the project ‘Parents worth the effort’. All three organizations participate in the national project ‘Parents and Diversity’ and make use of what they learnt on this new project, which is financially supported by the province of Noord-Brabant. Training course ‘Parents worth the effort’ was developed on the basis of ‘Parents and Diversity’ and is intended for educators and managers of the child care provider institutions as well as for cooperating partners within the different communities: school counselling services, pre-school-coordinators and schools.

End: the journey has not come to an end

In general, for early innovators, precursors amongst centres and schools into innovation, transferring an innovation and disseminating it out onto the field means a lot of hard work. Innovating and implementing appear to be separate tracks, but the idea of drawing a line between developing an innovation and disseminating the results, between inventing the change and implementing the results might be wrong.

Participative innovation is based on the idea that the people directly involved (in this case the coordinators, educators and teachers communicating with the parents) have the competence to cooperate: their experiences, ideas and propositions have their influence on the final composition of the innovation product (a method, a policy).

During the project running time the professionals work on targets they formulated themselves. Thus, the innovation is linked to development within the child care provider institution itself.

The pilot child care centres directly share all newly developed knowledge and insight with the field. This provides the inspiration to set up processes within and outside the organization. By involving as many relevant parties as possible in the process of innovation, implementation takes place simultaneously.

Walking on both tracks simultaneously means that innovating becomes implementing and implementing becomes innovating. A cyclic process that does not end, but makes the child care provider institution improve her quality on a non-stop basis. The journey is not over.



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² Smart Targets

Specific: what are we going to do exactly, and how do we go about it? Indicate precisely what you are going to do, so that only one explanation is possible. Define your targets.

Measurable: How much are we going to do? Make results visible. Describe the results so that they are measurable.



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Acceptable: is there any social supportive base for what we are doing? When you accept the target, and fix it with other parties, it will be widely supported.

Realistic: Is what we want feasible? Neither be easy or too ambitious; make sure there is a challenge

Time related: when will we be done? Setting a time limit indicates when the targets should have been reached.

3

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