

ON THE IMPACT OF EVALUATION. APPLIED RESEARCH ON ARTS EDUCATION PROGRAMMES AS A TOOL FOR DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

In the last decade, quality standards for the practice of arts education have rightly risen. At the same time, it becomes more important for arts education projects to prove their success to funding bodies. This development has created an increasing need to assess the impact of arts education projects, often making it a self-referential action. This article takes one step back and raises the question more generally: what impact can an evaluation have on a project and how can it be done in order to create an added-value for the practice of arts education?

By analysing the examples of the German-wide programme *Arts and Games* of the Robert Bosch Foundation and the Foundation Brandenburger Tor as well as the project *Foyer Public* of the Theatre Basel, both evaluated by the independent research institute EDUCULT in Vienna, possible impacts of evaluation on the projects themselves are presented. Results of this analysis shed light on lessons learned through these projects on a practical level. From research experience, to how assumptions are made about prerequisites, to how evaluations can be relevant to the practice and how it is possible to generate an impact. One option for achieving these goals is the implementation of a co-creative research design which is examined more in detail on a theoretical level, defining advantages and challenges of this approach.

Keywords: *arts education, applied research, impact, assessment, transfer.*

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Applied research in the field of arts and arts education has become increasingly important for the development of activities in the field. The practitioners recognize the potential that lies in a scientific perspective on their work. Nevertheless, not every research approach is suitable to support the field of practice. The big question which arises these days is how to be relevant for the practice, how to meet the needs of the practitioners, while at the same time keeping a critical distance to the object of investigation. This is strongly connected to the research design. Relevance can be assured by defining the research questions and methods according to the situation in the field and in close exchange with it. In this context, the possibilities of co-creative approaches and transfer of research results move into focus. This leads to the main question: what are the prerequisites of accompanying research and evaluations to have an impact on the object of research, i. e. the project and its practitioners?

Two things should be clarified in advance: Firstly, when this article talks about arts education processes dealing with aesthetic phenomena in general are included. This research is less about arts education in the context of school curriculum subjects such as music or visual arts, but rather about programmes and participation projects, which take place either outside school or in cooperation with people from outside the school, and which can affect all generations.

Secondly, the objectives of assessments of arts education programmes and projects are diverse and often have a focus. Here, however, a holistic approach should be taken, which includes research on all project dimensions. These are:

1. the framework conditions, i. e. the project context including the legal framework, but also the objectives that are associated with the project by different stakeholders,
2. the structural quality, i. e. the conceptual design, distribution of tasks, but also the financial and human resources,
3. the quality of the process, i. e. the forms of cooperation and communication between different actors, and the implementation of activities,
4. the quality of results, which includes direct outputs, but also wider effects and the impact.

In addition, there may be specific questions about relevance, coherence and transfer of project results.

The answer to the question how evaluation can have an impact on the object of research is provided by two exemplary evaluations: first, the evaluation of the programme *Arts and Games* in Germany for supporting cooperation between kindergartens/primary schools and cultural institutions such as museums, theatres, opera houses, etc. that allowed young children to encounter arts in the institutions. Second, the reflection of the first processes in the co-creative evaluation of the *Foyer*

Public of Theatre Basel also helps to generate knowledge about possible impact of evaluations of the education work of arts institutions.

Reasons for evaluating arts education projects

The research question that has become increasingly important in recent years is that of the impact of arts education projects and programmes as Schonmann [2014] describes it as “evaluation” and together with “assessing individual achievements” [ibid.: 25] one of the two main goals in arts education research. Above all, programme evaluation is often intended to legitimize public funding and integration into education curricula. Politicians and administrators as well as project implementers demand proof that arts education has a positive impact. This does not only refer to a narrow artistic impact, but is mainly connected to cultural, social, and aesthetic goals, as well as to personal, literacy, numeracy, and economic aims as Bamford [2006] has outlined. By analysing existing concepts, strategies, political demands, project applications, etc., Elbertzhagen [2010] compiled a whole range of claims on the effectiveness of arts education projects in Germany. On an individual level these are:

- artistic competences, positive image of arts and culture, skills to understand cultural phenomena, cultural participation;
- holistic learning, supporting creativity, individual competences and personal development in general, enjoyment and relaxation, digital competences, intercultural competences;
- learning capability, meaningful leisure activities, communication skills, cognitive skills, civic education, critical thinking, ability to judge, societal thinking, educational opportunities, quality of life, meeting the challenges of the future.

On a societal level these are:

- generation of new audiences and new artists;
- generation of an artistic space and an arts friendly environment;
- preservation and support of cultural heritage, culture as economical factor, culture as social factor (e. g., intercultural dialogue, integration), culture as ecological factor;
- raising the educational level (and lowering costs of low educational level in society), development of educational approaches, school development.

Besides the need for pure legitimization, the daily work of EDUCULT as a research institution that evaluates i. a. arts education projects and programmes shows that there are other objectives connected to the assessment of impacts as Renz [2019] outlines for applied sciences in the field of cultural policy. Practitioners do

not only need to prove their successes to funding bodies, but also want to develop their own project during the implementation process as well as to learn how to implement future or other on-going projects better. Sometimes impact assessment is necessary for establishing concepts and strategies for the implementation of arts education projects in a wider scheme. Stakeholders define which goals are in focus. Research must reveal these goals and take them into account in the research process.

Preconditions of impact assessment

The main objective of applied research, however, might not be to help legitimize, but instead to support a project and its implementors in their development, and by doing so to ameliorate the work of the arts education sector (here especially the work of cultural and educational institutions) in general by transferring knowledge to other projects and stakeholders. Therefore, it is necessary not only to find out if a project could contribute the previously mentioned impact, but also to analyse chains of effects and causalities. Why did a certain effect occur, and which factors contributed to its occurrence? Which structural qualities and process qualities have contributed to which outcomes? To what extent did they also limit certain effects? It quickly becomes clear that an impact evaluation must take a holistic approach to be able to make statements. The model of a Theory of Change [i. e. Taplin, Clark 2012] which is commonly used in the evaluation of programmes and projects in the field of development cooperation is a helpful tool to understand an intervention logic. It explains which input and activities have led to which outputs, and to which outcomes and impacts these in turn have contributed.

However, the list of possible impacts shows that it might not always be easy or even possible to prove a certain chain of effect. Research on arts education projects runs the risk of presenting apparently causal connections and thus tends to confirm the legitimacy of activities rather than provide scientific evidence [Chrusciel 2017: 44]. Aesthetic processes are largely subjectively understood and therefore elude objectively measurable criteria. Consequently, it is important to interpret validity as transitory and to achieve it again and again in a situation-specific way [Wimmer et al. 2013: 13]. When setting up the research design for a project evaluation, this feature has to be taken into account.

Therefore, applied research to have an impact on the intervention and its implementors cannot only be the sheer assessment per se. Rather a well-designed exchange between research and practice as well as the transfer from research to practice are obligatory. In this case, development processes [Fricke 2006] and empowerment processes [Unger 2014] can be supported. A closer cooperation of these two stakeholder groups leads to certain challenges. There might be disagreements when it comes to the definition of the research questions. Naturally, research and practice

do not always pose the same questions to the object of interest. The experience of evaluation shows that regular reflections and discussions are key at this point. Furthermore, there is the danger that research easily adopts the goals of practice, not revealing the methods and sources.

Certain research approaches can help to prevent these risks from occurring. First, design thinking, i. e. including different scientific disciplines and the consideration of people's needs and motivations, should be the principle for applied research which implies an honesty towards the problems of an intervention. Second, a mixed methods approach, that means the integration of quantitative data collection methods, ensures that researchers do not rely solely on the qualitative answers of project participants and thus do not take individual statements as the single basis for interpretation. However, qualitative survey methods in particular can do justice to the special characteristics of arts education projects. Especially the focus group interview is a relevant data collection tool which gives the participants enough space to influence the course of the discussion, to address what is important to them, to bring in additional, different perspectives and to explicate their own experiences and assumptions. Since specific experiences, problems and solution strategies are brought into the discussion and are illuminated from different perspectives, there is a chance to capture a wide variety of perspectives and identify research gaps. In addition, a focus group discussion has the advantage of offering the possibility of a direct confrontation of different positions and potential divergences or conflicts can be discussed [Bloor et al. 2001]. This leads to a reflection process which can have a direct influence on the project implementation, as outlined in the following paragraphs. Third, an option is a co-creative research approach [e. g. as described in Ehm, Weigl 2020]. The main idea behind such an approach is to make use of the expertise of the included practitioners. A characteristic feature is the common discussion of research goals and procedures which requires an open atmosphere to reflect on the different roles and presumptions of all persons included in the research process [Weigl 2019: 49].

Findings from research practice

The accompanying evaluation of an arts education programme can serve as an example for analysing possible impacts of an assessment: the programme *Arts and Games* was implemented in the years 2013 to 2019 by the Robert Bosch Foundation and the Foundation Brandenburger Tor in Germany; the applied research institute EDUCULT evaluated the programme from 2015 until its completion. *Art and Games* was designed as a support programme that brought cultural institutions together with kindergartens and primary schools to create projects that allowed young children to experience art in a creative way. Within the first period (2013 to

2015), ten cultural institutions such as the German National Theatre Weimar and the Museum Ostwall Dortmund were funded. The second funding period included six additional institutions like the Pinakotheken Munich, the German Film Institute and Film Museum in Frankfurt and the German Opera Düsseldorf. During the third funding period (2017 to 2019) further institutions entered the programme, e. g. the bremer shakespeare company and the State Museum Hanover. These were supported by a tandem partner which was one of the already participating institutions. Within the second period, the evaluation focused on the cooperation processes and the programme structure while within the third period, the tandem network was the centre of attention. Next to that, an impact analysis of one funded cooperation project was undertaken, especially aiming to explore the impact on the participating children [Ehm et al. 2019; Ehm et al. 2020].

The evaluation of the project structure and processes was based on document analysis, expert interviews, focus group discussions with art managers, directors and kindergarten teachers, as well as online surveys. The research design of the impact analysis included interviews with kindergarten teachers, art managers, directors and parents. Next to that, participant observations were carried out alongside participatory research laboratories with the children. During the whole process the exchange with the programme manager and the communication of intermediate results were elementary. Constructive criticism aimed to support the further development in terms of structure and process of the on-going programme.

Due to the long-term commitment of the accompanying research, it is now possible to identify impacts of the evaluation and the included recommendations. Specifically, this means for example that based on the scientific evidence that is the data analysis results, there was a need for an exchange format for educational stakeholders; it was indeed implemented in the last period of the programme. The recommended obligation for kick-off meetings of project teams was realized. Mutual visits of cultural and educational institutions were seen as helpful, which became part of a new format in the third phase. The existing project teams were also kept for the third phase as recommended. For supporting the transfer of the programme results, a documentation of experiences, done in various forms and media, was prepared. It was seen as very important to include the leading personnel of cultural and educational institutions more in the cooperation projects to promote change. Efforts were observed to reach this aim, e. g. by offering a special meeting of all leaders. The discourse on early childhood arts education was supported, i. e. by a literature review on the state of research which was commissioned in the last year of the programme [Kirsch, Stenger 2020].

Considering these exemplary points, the evaluation was an important tool for decision-making in the programme development during the years of implementation.

Less easily identified impacts are the consequences that focus groups and round tables (which have a less standardized approach and aim to reflect and improve directly the project processes) had on the project participants involved. In evaluation rounds after such data collection methods, the participants expressed that the discussions contributed to a deeper reflection, which in turn positively influenced the work in the project. Also, the feedback of the programme manager supported the evidence of impact the evaluation process had on the on-going project.

Co-creation as a way to boost the impact of evaluation for the stakeholders

The methods for evaluating *Art and Games* were chosen to generate sufficient data, to have the best possible effect on the programme and at the same time to be efficient. The research design included dialogue-oriented methods, i. e. individual interviews, focus groups and research workshops which make use of interactive and creative methods with different stakeholders (such as arts educators, children, institution leaders). However, the nature of the programme did not allow for a deeper inclusion of the practitioners of the single cooperation projects into all research steps. However, such a so-called co-creative research approach [Ehm, Weigl 2020] which is strongly connected to the Practical Participatory Evaluation defined by Cousins/Whitmore [1998] is currently used by EDUCULT to evaluate the impact of the new *Foyer Public* of the Theatre Basel [EDUCULT 2020]. First experiences suggest that this approach allows the stakeholders to address the challenges of applied research in arts education by establishing a working alliance between researchers and practitioners. This setting, which we call “co-creative”, shall ensure that practically relevant research questions are asked, a common language when raising questions and transferring results is found, and relevant options for further action are developed. The main added value is that the research process itself influences the project work and its implementors. Practitioners get to know more about social scientific research processes and gain a reflective view on project structures and the implantation of activities. They are empowered to better understand why and how they work. All that happens in a broader learning process through their own participation in generating knowledge which has a supportive effect. In a best-case scenario, it even enables practitioners to integrate the research activities into everyday practice and to continue them in the sense of further developing their own practice [Ehm, Weigl 2020: 143–145].

In the first few months of the realization of *Foyer Public*, the co-creative evaluation strategy encouraged the cultural managers to observe and note their own activities and to get in touch with visitors and employees of Theatre Basel. This was supported by evaluation materials such as digital observation sheets or interview

guides, which were developed together with EDUCULT. Technically these research instruments were implemented as online questionnaires in which the practitioners could regularly upload their input. Through these activities, the cultural managers were animated to adopt a reflexive attitude. In addition to that, the evaluation questions and activities encouraged them to continuously keep an eye on their goals.

At the end of the season, a joint meeting was held between the researchers, the cultural managers, and other members of the management team of Theatre Basel. The evaluation data prepared by EDUCULT was subjected to a joint analysis and thus the evaluation model of the Theory of Change was further developed. In the end, an impact story was created that illustrates the connection between the activities set and the goals achieved. In this meeting, new goals of *Foyer Public* became clear as well as those that could not be achieved with the previous activities. Based on this, further priorities were set for the work in the next season. This shows that the evaluation helps Theatre Basel to plan its activities based on evidence and to keep the concrete goals in mind along the way.

The main idea is not to turn practitioners into researchers, but to make use of their expertise, not only in terms of contents of arts education, but also concerning methods which might be used in the research process. Here, the co-creative approach is linked to art-based research designs which make use of artistic methods as tools for research [Greenwood 2019; Chilton, Leavy 2014]. Referring to the example of the evaluation of *Foyer Public*, data collection of the marketing department of Theatre Basel as well as data from entrance sensors can flow into the bigger data pool. Workshop skills used in theatre pedagogical settings help to develop new forms of focus groups who are directly involved in the theatrical educational activities. Taking notes and documenting own observations as well as taking photos of activities are methods which can be easily implemented by involved practitioners within their daily business. An internal analysis of the evaluation process itself shows that an important corrective is that the stimulus for independent documentation only works if the methods are actually helpful and can be implemented without major additional effort as part of the daily work. The experience of the evaluation of *Foyer Public* has also shown that developing the methods and analysing the material need the close interaction of researchers and practitioners. Otherwise, a bigger adaptation of the research instruments would have been necessary during the process.

In different phases of the research process, different levels of this interaction can be realized, depending on the objectives and capabilities of researchers and practitioners. According to this dynamic model described by Ehm/Weigl [2020: 149], six research phases are defined, such as the initiation phase, the design phase, the data collection phase, the analysis phase, the interpretation phase, and the transfer phase.

Based on the experiences in evaluating projects such as *Foyer Public*, the hypothesis is that the level of interaction in each of these phases corresponds to the impact an assessment has on the field of practice. This idea is also supported by other participatory approaches in the field of arts education as exemplified by Nagel et al. [2015: 99–100] while at the same time pointing out difficulties of participatory research. The design phase is very much connected to the reflection of the project objectives and the benefits the development of a Theory of Change can have as described above, the activities of the practitioners in the data collection phase lead to an implicit learning and make adaptations of the process more probable. A co-creative interpretation phase allows for the inclusion of more perspectives and therefore leads to more relevant research results. The success in transferring the research results to the relevant target groups depends on the inclusion of these stakeholders. As the most important target group, the project implementors, is already participating in former research phases, the transfer into practice is much more likely than in other research settings. The dissemination of results that are also relevant for other stakeholders has also more potential if practitioners and researchers are involved in this phase.

A co-creative approach demands a lot from the actors involved. The great advantage is that actors in the field of arts education are usually familiar with co-creative working methods in general. However, it is necessary to critically question the relationships and roles, especially as the roles of researchers and the research object is dissolving. Thus, the self-reflexivity of all participants is needed, e. g. to reveal hidden agendas, and the principle of incompleteness of reflexive processes has to be acknowledged. In all phases of the research process, a focus must be set on language as the basis for a differentiated debate among the stakeholders, as also Unger et al. [2014: 3] emphasise. Furthermore, as the example of the evaluation of *Art and Games* shows, a long-term research approach supports the generation of an impact through the research as an evaluation includes further activities that bring actors into dialogue and question the relevance of the project. It unfolds a space for reflection and therefore often leads to re-adaptations of the project in the process of implementation. The more time is dedicated to this, the more intensive is the examination of the project. Hence, evaluation creates a basis for in-depth discussions – if it happens in a co-creative setting or not.

These reflections on the evaluation examples suggest that the effort given to an evaluation and the impact of it to the practitioners are strongly connected. But a co-creative and/or long-term approach does not make sense for all projects. The decision to use such an approach should depend on the objectives and the research questions. In this manner, the best way for creating an impact on the practice of arts education can be chosen, always keeping in mind that one goal of applied research is to be relevant for the practice.

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