CoReD Collaborative Redesign with schools

Cross case synthesis: School Development Evaluation Tool

School Development Evaluation Tool (SDET): applied in three primary and lower secondary schools

Range of contexts of use

The SDET tool is applicable for primary and secondary schools. Over the course of CoReD it was used at two lower secondary schools in Sweden, as well as one primary and lower secondary school in Iceland. The design of all three schools was seen as traditional, the buildings are relatively old and in need of both maintenance and renovation. All three schools were considered in the phase of planning potential alterations, and some minor alterations had already been made at one of the schools. Two small focus groups of selected teachers took part in the evaluation and planning process in Sweden, one at a school in school district 1 and one at a school in school district 2. At the Icelandic school the whole staff took part in the evaluation and planning process, working in three focus groups, two constituting the teaching staff attending students in grades 1 to 4 and grades 5 to 10 respectively, and one made up of non-teaching staff members.

Rationale for activities and tool adopted

The SDET tool covers six dimensions, or strands, that need to be reviewed and accounted for in successful school development. One of the six strands is focused on the physical learning environment. The groups of staff members involved at each school site reviewed and discussed school dimensions or factors tied to five categories reflecting different aspects of school design and the physical learning environment: the overall design of the building, student workspaces, material for teaching and visibility of student work, the school library, and finally, technology and equipment.

The tool was laid out to support and stimulate discussions among staff members as they analyse and evaluate their present environment of teaching or consider preferred alterations for future uses. It is therefore suitable to use when staff members or other stakeholders at a given school are in the phase of planning physical changes of the teaching environment. The tool was used to evaluate the pedagogical qualities of present facilities and consider possible changes in the physical environment, as well as eventual changes in school practice, based upon reflection and open discussions about present strengths and weaknesses. The outcome was expected to inform decisions regarding the present state and future changes of the teaching environment. It is intended to increase the match between pedagogical practice, organization in more general terms, and the physical teaching environment.

What happened?

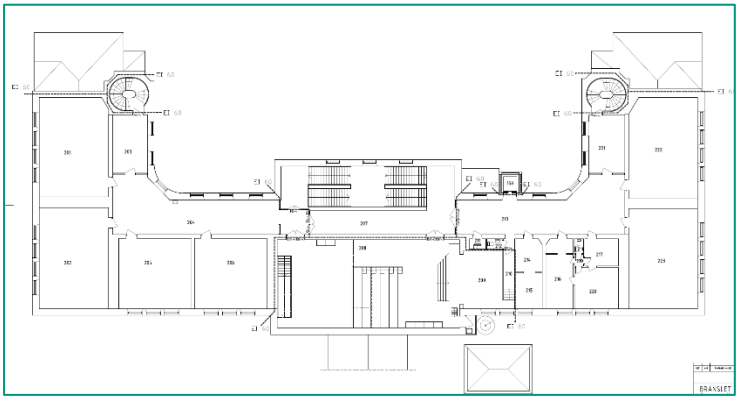
The SDET tool was applied at a relatively late point in our research and development project, mainly due to Covid-restrictions hindering school visits and developmental work. The tool was, furthermore, introduced as applicable for early thoughts about eventual alterations of the physical school environment and not intended to bring about physical changes overnight, but rather to ignite a mindset open to eventual changes to be made in the course of further reflection and development. Due to restrictive measures during the Covid-19-epidemic, researchers could not be present as the evaluation meetings were taking place at the three schools. Participants in each group of staff therefore appointed one member as a leader to direct discussions in their group.

Swedish schools in older premises used SDET to ignite a change mindset

Outcomes

The group of three teachers at a Swedish lower secondary school in school district 1 placed the overall design of their school and its´ student workplaces at the lowest level or stage 1. Traditional and overcrowded classrooms allowed only for minimal flexibility in a building considered of rigid structure and hard to change. The number of students attending classes was considered too high. Even though some classrooms under review had a bit of extra space to offer, most rooms were filled with tables and chairs arranged in rows with little or no manoeuvring space for other arrangements. Student work was only in view in classrooms assigned to art and crafts, in part due to an inclusion policy forbidding visual distractions on classroom walls. Students did, however, have the possibility to share their work online, which helped to tie the current state of teaching material and student work visibility to stage 3, as defined by the tool. The focus group of teachers ranked the school library and technical equipment as being at stage 5, since both were considered easily accessible. Every student was said to have access to his or her own computer, and spaces assigned to science and sports both well designed and well equipped for varied educational practice.

In accordance with these results, the group made some suggestions about how to allow for more flexibility in the physical environment, for instance by designing spaces for breakout sessions in selected classrooms, possibly with partitions made of glass. A sliding wall to close off the scene in the assembly hall to create a flexible space applicable for varied school practice was also suggested. Other options, not as easily attainable, included measures to decrease the number of students assigned to each classroom or simply construct annexes to the current building on site.



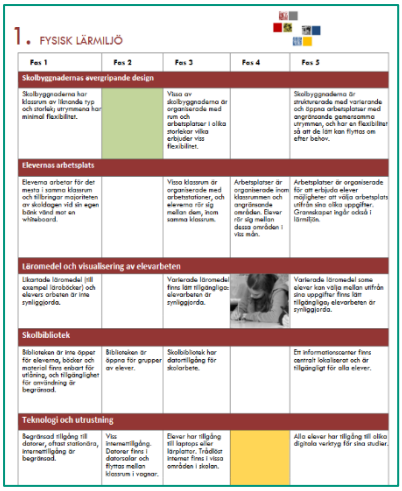
The Swedish lower secondary school, though old and mainly of a traditional design, includes some streetspace corridors and was judged to be flexible to an extent, partly due to students having good access to digital space.

Outcomes

The three Swedish teachers at the lower secondary school in school district 2 reviewed a section consisting mainly of ordinary classrooms, similar in size and layout. The spaces were, nevertheless, considered flexible to a limited extent. Students had to move between classrooms to attend classes in different subjects and had access to a relatively large multizone space offering a variety of zones and workstations. Workstations in offer could also be found in some of the classrooms. Some of the media screens in place were moveable while and some stationary. Student work could be viewed in some of the classrooms, display cupboards and common spaces. The school library was said to be open to students and educational resources accessible, the students had personal Chromebooks at their disposal and good access to other digital devices. The location of a digital information screen in the lobby was under debate as to where it would be most visible to students. A process of placing QR-codes as keys to information for students and their parents throughout the building was underway.

In Iceland, in the primary and lower secondary school, all three discussion groups went carefully through each category laid out in the tool strand on physical environment, as well as the stages laid out for each category. This allows for an interesting comparison between outcomes in three different groups of staff members. The overall design of the school building, for instance, was considered at stage 1, 2 or 3, depending on groups, partly because teachers working with different age levels of students reside in different sections of the building. All three groups, on the other hand, were in alignment when it came to the school library, placing it at stage 1, as a closed space with limited opening hours and books only available for lending rather than use on site.

As to preferred changes in other categories, the two teachers' groups wanted to reach stages 4 or 5. For that to happen, the teachers of students in grades 1 to 4 thought they would have to take up new methods, get more funding, change their perspective or views, allow for more professional reflection, and keep receiving continued professional support. Teachers of students in grades 5 to 10 called for changes in organisation and the physical environment, in particular a greater selection of teaching materials, digital devices and open spaces. The group of non-teaching staff members, however, made some interesting notions about alterations, that did not require as much effort or support, but rather some practical changes in organisation, underlining that the current facilities could be used more effectively.



Using the physical environment strand of the SDET (left: in Swedish) or, indeed, all the strands (right: full SDET in Icelandic) stimulates discussion, empowering practitioners in relation to space and pedagogy.

Conclusions

The three case studies, related here, turned out to be somewhat limited in execution and scale, but serve well to show that the SDET tool can help to ignite and stimulate professional discussions at an early stage in the planning phase of redesign of school facilities. Going through the strand on physical environment of school practice and possibly more strands in the tool, preferably all of them regardless of their relations to school design, should empower practitioners to understand the dimensions and importance of school space. The tool can help practitioners not only to strengthen their own professional profile and make informed decisions about their own practice, but also develop school spaces in alignment with their own preferred pedagogies.

The tool is accessible and easy to use but limited in scope and detail. It fits, therefore, primarily as the first step, ***'starting where people are (mentally and physically)'*** within ***'the complex, lengthy process that is change'***.

It should be noted, that SDET is not suitable for collecting detailed and reliable data about the state of school premises or school practice but rather to stimulate the professional staff at any given school to discuss and make up their own mind about how they would like to see their school or school practice, to explore ideas and different possibilities in that regard.

It should also be noted that the tool was updated in 2018, a few years back, which means that some of the points of view or considerations represented there can be considered outdated. This is particularly true when it comes to digital devices or technology, and to some extent the school library, now that so many primary and secondary school students have digital devices at their personal disposal. An update, regarding these issues, and some detailed additions regarding the physical environment, in particular nuances and variations tied to classroom sizes, breakout spaces and common areas, might help to make the tool an even stronger platform for professional initiatives and collective reflections about school practice, school development and eventually, redesign of school facilities.

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