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AI Practitioner

Bjørn Hauger

Bjørn Hauger is a sociologist and associate of the TAOS Insitute. He has been an initiator and driving force in introducing and developing Appreciative Inquiry as an approach for organizational development in work with children in Norway. He has written several books and articles on this topic based on his experiences.
Contact: bjorn@lent.no

Vidar Bugge-Hansen

Vidar Bugge-Hansen is a teacher and founder of the SMART Center; a center for social innovation in child care based on Appreciative Inquiry. He has written several books using strengths-based approaches in working with children in kindergarten and elementary schools.
Contact: vidar.bugge-hansen@tonsberg.kommune.no

Feature Choice

SMART Upbringing

Creating Environments So That All Children and Youth Can Realize Their Potential

SMART upbringing: How do you create environments that make it possible for children and youth to realize their potential, and that support the staff engaged with them to be at their best? This article details experiences from an innovative development project in the municipality of Re, Norway.

SMART upbringing[1] is a continuing development project across all services working with children and youth in the municipality of Re in Norway. The development project has attempted to find new and better ways in which the services can work to prevent psychological and social problems among children and youth, and create upbringing environments in which more children and youth can experience inclusion and be given the opportunity to realize their potential.

SMART upbringing has used a strength-based and innovative development strategy to develop uplifting preventive practices. This article details several central knowledge traditions on which this developmental work draws: the strengths-based disciplines and the action research tradition of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Some of the most important innovations created through this development project are: 1) the development of a shared everyday language that makes it possible to see and put words to everything that is good and that works well between individuals and within the social systems of which each is a part (SMART language); 2) the Dream Class: a concept to involve children and youth as co-creators of their own upbringing environments.

1 SMART stands for: *S*trengths-based *M*edvirkning (Cooperation) *A*ppreciation *R*elationships and *T*raining.

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Criticism directed toward use of the medical model in preventive work is that people are passive receivers of those services.

The innovative development work SMART upbringing is now spreading to municipalities and services that work with children and young people all over Norway. In the final part of the article I will highlight some factors that have helped make this possible.

Background

In Norway, there is increasing concern about the psychological health of children and youth. It does not appear that the scope of the problem is being reduced in spite of increased welfare development, the strengthening of the preventive services and the instigation of an array of national programs directed at many of the problems related to psychological health, school truancy, bullying and so forth.

Most of the preventive efforts draw on the medical model. Effort is directed at uncovering problems, and one is then dependent on making a precise diagnosis to be able to select the correct treatment. Criticism directed toward use of the medical model in preventive work is that people are passive receivers of those services (users, clients and patients). Efforts will tend to be made late in the chain of problem development, as problem analysis must be performed before the "right" intervention can be made. Further, a preventive effort based on a chosen disciplinary perspective will mean a narrowing of the choice of action possibilities to find the solution to the problem. The medical model is the basis of the planning and completion of preventive interventions toward individuals in relation to prevention of specific problems at the population level (bullying, eating disorders, truancy) and in relation to planning and completion of the holistic preventive effort toward children and youth in a municipality.

Over the past ten years in the municipality of Re in Vestfold, the development of a model using strength-based and innovative development strategies to strengthen the preventive effort aimed at children and youth (Hauger, 2015; Hauger, 2018) has occurred within the services. It can be traced back to a development project based on AI begun at the largest elementary school in Re in 2005.

The concept of strengths-based perspectives, or strengths-based practices arose as a reaction to the medical model of change strategies.

Strengths-based approaches

The concept of strengths-based perspectives, or strengths-based practices arose as a reaction to the medical model of change strategies described as defensive within disciplines such as social work (Saleebey, 2006), care services, psychological health work (Rapp, 1998), pedagogy, management (Clifton &

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All people and social systems have inherent resources.

Rath, 2004), and organizational development (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). This perspective can also be described as a "positive psychology perspective". An important shared characteristic of the use of strengths-based approaches is that this work is built on explicit assumptions, values and principles that can be activated in a development process. This includes a foundational philosophy that all people and social systems have inherent resources. Further, one can consider that people and social systems are at their best at solving problems effectively and act in a socially responsible way when we pay attention to and activate these resources. A strengths-based change process begins with the identification of these resources in oneself and in those with whom one is to cooperate.

The starting point was a very demanding class with a big competitive streak.

The Dream Class, forerunner of SMART upbringing

The emergence of SMART upbringing can be understood in terms of an emerging new (strengths-based) discourse at Kirkevoll School, the largest elementary school in Re. Between 2005 and 2010, AI was used as an approach to work with organizational development at the school (Hauger, 2015). The repeated processes in the personnel and with the students enabled the creation of a climate that promoted innovative thinking. Vidar Bugge-Hansen (2017) says:

> *The starting point was a very demanding class with a big competitive streak, cliques and gangs and several individual students with significant social and academic difficulties. What characterized our work was the problem focus. ...We teachers felt stuck with the solution and tried to tell the students what was wise for them to do. We made rules with consequences that the students didn't feel had meaning for them. We saw after a while that this focus did not have the desired effects. We had screwed the screw hard enough and it was just leading to more conflicts and opposition, from the parents as well. We had to change perspective from a problem focus to a strength focus. We had to change our ideas about how we employees knew what functioned best for the students. We had to create processes in which the students became involved in finding the best solutions. We needed to look at the enormous unused resource lying in the students instead of having the focus on what was difficult. When everyone pulls on the same end of the rope there are few limitations for what can be created.*

The innovative Dream Class was based on a perspective shift.

Through three years of development work, a team of teachers developed a new concept for work with the development of class environments and innovations in the day-to-day relations of children and adults. The concept was called the Dream Class (Våge & Bugge-Hansen, 2015, Hauger, 2018) and based on a visualized use of AI in work with children (over the age of ten). The innovative

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The concept of the Dream Class itself can be understood as an innovation in two ways: first, in the way a class can work with problem resolution; second, this is also an innovation within the use of participant-action research with children and youth.

Dream Class was based on a perspective shift: instead of looking at the class as a problem to be solved, the teachers chose to look at the class as a system full of resources to be released. Instead of viewing themselves as experts who initiate and implement changes, they chose to see themselves as facilitators of a change process in which the students took the position of co-creators of their own learning environments.

The concept of the Dream Class itself can be understood as an innovation in two ways; first, in the way a class can work with problem resolution. Instead of teachers intervening with the class or individual students, an innovation approach based on collective actions is applied. When the students are involved in the work of finding new solutions, this occurs through processes based on "second order" learning. The students are involved in conversations about what has happened and what they want to happen through a positive lens. Working with the classroom environment development through use of second order change methodology is a new idea in this work.

Second, this is also an innovation within the use of participant-action research with children and youth. YPAR (Youth Participatory Action Research) is an umbrella term for different participant-action research traditions in work with children and youth (King, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015). There are few examples of action research used as a development strategy in the classroom and among young students. There are few (or no) examples that show these processes being driven by teachers without the support of external researchers. Among other things, this new development is built on a visualized action research model, along with the use of roleplay and play to develop and integrate new rules for social interaction. How one can work with the concept of the Dream Class is described in detail in the book SMART upbringing 3 (Våge & Bugge-Hansen, 2015). In this article, we will show how the students took on the role of designers of their own social environments through the process.

Children develop prototypes

The tasks involve getting everyone in the organization to look at themselves as designers.

In the work of developing a new idea and integrating the new solution suggestions there will, as a rule, be a phase in which a test, a prototype, version of the new suggestions is tried. Cogland, Suri and Canales (2007) point out that prototypes are the core of how designers do their work, taking steps from abstract ideas, theories and plans to a specification of the concept that makes it possible to experience how the project will work, and to collect sensory experiences connected to the idea.

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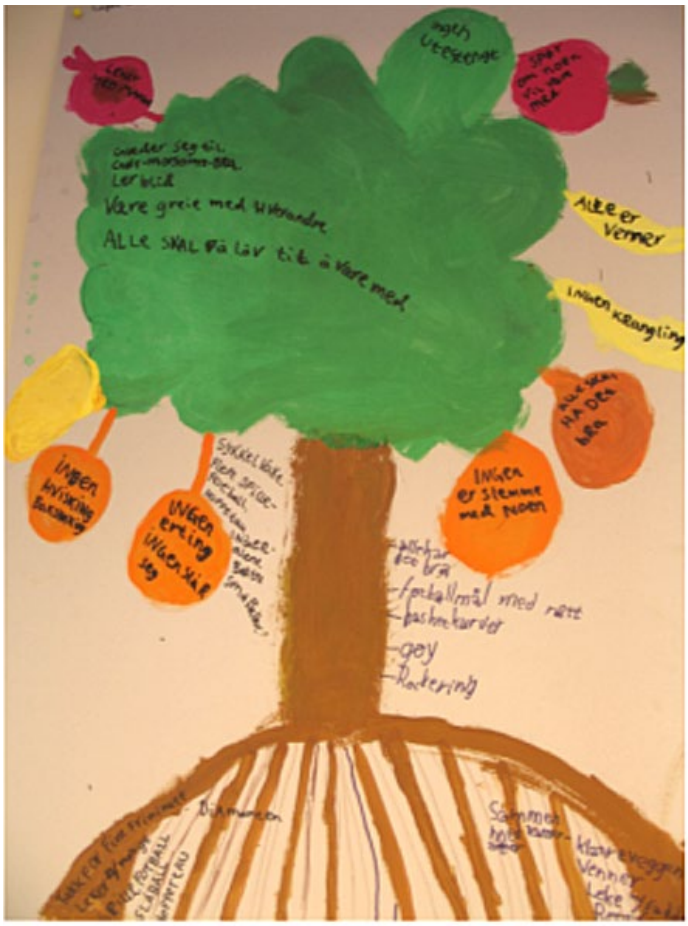

Children developed prototypes that made sense to them

Prototypes can be made in any area. Several proponents who have worked with design thinking in organizations point out that the tasks involve getting everyone in the organization to look at themselves as designers. For example, there is a clear connection between the ways designers work and action learning. Action learning concerns viewing all one's actions as trials (prototypes) that can be changed into something that is even better. To achieve this, one must have developed values or a type of proposed template about how one wishes to perform and interact with others. In the work with the Dream Class, new and creative ways in which the children can develop prototypes for play, being together during recess, and in work with learning are developed. Briefly put, the model that can be developed through the Dream Class can be described as follows:

1. The class identifies what they want to create, symbolized as a fruit, with an accompanying text such as: We want all students to be able to play during recess. They then vote on the desired social practice they wish to create (for example, types of play during recess that will enable everyone to participate).

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2. Thereafter the students brainstorm ideas about what it will require to achieve this.

3. The students then have the task of creating a roleplay or dramatizing different types of play activities in which they achieve this.

4. The social skills needed to achieve the desired interaction are trained.

5. Training, training...

6. Continued research to explore the situations once the new practice is established.

An important aspect of using role play to try out new scripts for play, conflict resolution between the students (including within friendship groups etc.) includes students being given the opportunity for an experimental and sensory relationship with the new solution suggestions. (Moulaert et al., 2010)

Children in new forms of dialogue in the Dream Class.

Development of new forms of conversation with children and youth

SMART upbringing makes the assumption that if a perspective shift occurs in the preventive work from defensive thinking (based on the medical model) to a more relationally oriented mindset and practice, one will be able to be more successful in preventive work. Senge and Scharmer (2006) point out the importance of the need to develop tools as a social resource to make second order changes possible in organizations. The SMART upbringing model has developed an array of such tools. The most widespread innovation is development of a special verbal-visual language about strengths. How we use the language, what sorts of words we use and how we converse together to create meaning about what happens has great significance for how adults and children can be together and how children can relate to one another. In a social constructionist perspective, one assumes that words are not primarily a tool for the reflection of the world, but that the words we use create the world of which we are a part.

In social environments characterized by a defensive mindset, there is a tendency for one to notice what is different through a 'negative lens.'

Authors Gergen, McNamee and Barrett (2001) point out that a natural development in all social systems under formation is the creation of "we" and "they" relationships through the words we use and the way we create meaning about what happens. At the school, and in other social systems of which children are a part, processes of civility, friendship and community will arise. When one is part of the formation of such a group, one is part of a WE. Those who are not part of this community under construction are viewed as a THEY. In social environments characterized by a defensive mindset, there is a tendency for one

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New strengths-based language mediating the conversation.

to notice what is different through a "negative lens", noticing what is different in terms of negative value in relation to one's own frame of reference.

When different groups form, hierarchies can also easily arise. Some view themselves as "better than others", more valuable, and seek to win dominance. Seeking dominance, holding others down and winning at the expense of others is described by Gergen, McNamee and Barrett (2001) in terms of processes that create hard differences between people. Soft differences are described as a way of encountering difference in which one does not seek dominance. The core of a strengths-based mindset is that one views difference as a resource. To see and put words to all difference as something positive, one requires a language that makes it possible to discover these positive qualities and a way to speak together (a discourse) that makes meaning-creation in a group occur with such a perspective. Such processes will then be able to contribute to the alteration of hard differences to soft differences.

This is the idea: children and adults in a school environment can be involved in work with creating relations and environments characterized by "soft differences". To achieve this, a language is needed that enables them to see that which is different in one another in a "positive way". SMART upbringing begins to experiment with teaching children and adults to apply a conceptual apparatus about positive characteristics in daily conversations with (and between) children, youth and their parents. Inspirational sources of development of this language (the semantic terms) are gathered from ART and the conceptual framework of Peterson and Seligman (2004) about VIA strengths.

When people develop words and concepts as mental representations of the nature of which we are part, what Vygotsky calls "psychological tools" are created. The meaning the words have begins to determine (mediate) human actions. When we begin to call a child "clever", this word will function as a psychological tool that mediates what we are starting to look for and how we interpret what the child does. The word becomes a tool that makes some aspects of this child come into focus, while others recede into the background. What occurs "inside us" when we begin to interpret what we see through words and mindsets is what Vygotsky (1982) calls "higher psychological processes". Artificial stimuli (words) become the direct cause of behaviour. One example is how a particular child is met in the classroom. Vygotsky points out in addition that the origin of higher psychological processes does not lie in the mind or the brain of the individual, but should be understood in the symbolic structures with which a culture supplies us (Veer and Valsiner, 1991 cited in Lock & Strong, 2014, p. 220).

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Description of the innovations

The aim of all the innovations under development in Re is that they should contribute to change practice in work with children and youth in a way that increases the opportunities for creating environments of upbringing, relationships, ways of working with learning and the like, that make it possible for more children (and adults) to enjoy life, experience inclusion and be valued. The SMART upbringing innovation (Våge & Bugge-Hansen, 2012. Hauger, 2018) includes:

1. A book accompanied by conceptual apparatus about strengths in the form of printed cards

2. An educational course that shows how the conceptual apparatus can be introduced to children (the first book was designed for children of preschool age). Central to this educational program is the idea that children take on the role of researcher. Each of the books (four in all) consist of an array of stories that describe everyday situations in which children can recognize themselves. The stories, used as a starting point, can be read aloud, so that the children can research what is working well between the them and what they can do and be to contribute to good things happening. The educational course is based on an action research method in which the students sit in a circle, listen to the story and decide on their own opinions of what is happening through drawing on a language about strengths. Thereafter they have appreciative dialogues with another student. Finally, the students share their observations in a plenary session.

Agents of new innovations

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AI-driven developmental processes build on core processes that involve an array of action research cycles.

3. The innovation shows how the students can take the step toward being researchers in a fictional world (a told story) and begin to research and reflect around one another's practice.

SMART upbringing has its source in the services working with children and youth. The aim of the developmental work is to develop a practice in the services with a greater ability to create inclusive environments and to promote wellbeing for all children and youth. Much is to be said for AI having been the most important inspirational source for how such innovative and strengths-based work can be developed and where it can lead. Over twenty-five managers and employees in the municipality, for example, have taken courses in AI at the University College of Southeast Norway. The networks established apply foundational elements from AI in their teaching work. At several of the institutions and services, core groups have been established to run organizational development processes based on AI.

AI-driven developmental processes build on core processes that involve an array of action research cycles described as a 5D model. One core process occurs in a positive lens perspective. Employees, managers, children and youth research their own practice through a positive lens. Attention is directed toward the exceptions in which the organization and people function at their best. This main cycle ends up with the organization (or the developmental work) making a shared picture (dream) of how they want things to become. In Re municipality, a vision has been developed of the preventive work that concerns contributing to development of robust (resilient) children and youth – and the services that allow all children and youth flower and be able to realize their potential.

The next phase of an AI-based process will be concerned with finding answers to the question of what types of changes need to occur in the existing practice and the social systems to achieve this. This is the Design phase, in which AI among other things draws upon the field of design. In the first phase of SMART upbringing, the first innovations were developed in an unplanned way.Individuals and their "passionate" initiatives were the power behind the development of the initial innovations, including the Dream Class concept and the development of the SMART language.

Designing infrastructures for long-term innovations

AI-based development work is often described as a process that goes through different cycles of action research. In what is described as the design phase of an AI process, one is particularly concerned with creating a supportive

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infrastructure that can contribute to the new social innovations spreading, being incorporated and enabling a continuous collaboration of improvements.

Since the development of SMART upbringing began, different concepts for strengths-based collaborative processes with children, young people and their parents in the upbringing work have been developed. The Dream Class is just one example. In after school programs in the municipality, a strengths-based concept has been developed to involve the children as co-creators in their upbringing environments (Hauger, 2018). In the child welfare system, parents are involved in the development of new services (Feyling, Engstrøm & Holte, 2018).

From the SMART festival 2018: 700 people attended the festival.

Photo courtesy of Belinda Orten

Manzine (2015) writes that one of the steps that can be taken to continue transformational development work that has already been initiated is to establish an infrastructure that can serve the work. In the period 2011–2017, SMART upbringing was a project in the services for children and young people. In 2017, the municipal council decided to establish a SMART centre for social innovation (Hauger, Bugge-Hansen, Paulsen & Thorkildsen, 2018). This centre was given the responsibility to continue the development work. Today the centre has eight employees.

In 2017, the municipal council decided to establish a SMART centre for social innovation.

This centre has established a digital platform for connecting people[2] , and physical spaces for learning together, such as an annual festival, different physical networks and training courses. This year (2019) more than one thousand people from all over Norway have attended these courses. The centre

2 (www.smartoppvekst.no)

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Together we create a municipality where children laugh!

From the trainer-the-trainer program, 2019.

is creating and spreading tools and methods to facilitate co-design processes with children in kindergarten, schools and after school programs. Seven books presenting different strengths-based tools for working with children have so far been published.

In 2017, we established our own train-the-trainer program for SMART upbringing and strengths-based change work. The training program takes place over the course of a year. More than one hundred managers and employees from different municipalities are currently participating or have participated in this training program.

In 2020, the municipality of Re will be merged with the municipality of Tønsberg. Our SMART Center for Social Innovation has developed an AI-based concept to develop new vision and values for this municipality (to be called Tønsberg). Nearly 500 residents – youth, politicians and employees – were involved in this process[3].

Our new adopted vision is: Together we create a municipality where children laugh!

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