

Adapting to complex environments: using developmental evaluation to build a place based approach to child wellbeing

Lauren Heery, Centre for Community Child Health: lauren.heery@mcri.edu.au
Amanda Jones, Berry Street

Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Research Symposium, 31st October 2014

Introduction

This is the story of a developmental evaluation

"Each developmental evaluation is a story" (Patton 2011, p.xiii)

This is the story of:

- How developmental evaluation has led to program, organisational and individual transformation
- The conditions that have facilitated this transformation
- How these conditions have been fostered

Context

The evaluand & evaluator

Connect for Kids

- Based in Shire of Murrindindi
- Established 2001 with private funding in response to identified youth disengagement from school, now multiple initiatives
- A place based approach

Centre for Community Child Health

- Leads two research groups at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and is a department of The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne
- Has over 20 years experience strengthening and refocusing service delivery to improve children's learning, health and wellbeing

Evaluative approach

The design

Designed with client to:

1. capture learning from ten years of implementation & clearly **articulate** the key ingredients, practices & process of program model, logic & suite of strategies

2. understand how program **compares with evidence**-informed community development interventions for children and young people

3. build on existing effective practices and further **develop** the current program model to ensure alignment with research evidence and examples of best practice in community development

4. **verify** whether program delivers its intended **outcomes**

Evaluative approach

The design

Later renegotiated to a two-phase design

Phase	Focus
1. Clarificatory evaluation (6 months)	Articulate the program's ingredients, practices and processes Compare the program with the evidence
2. Developmental evaluation (17 months)	Develop the program to ensure alignment with the evidence
3. Process and impact evaluation (17 months)	Verify whether the program delivers its intended outcomes

This story centres on the developmental evaluation period

Evaluative approach

Developmental evaluation

First described by Michael Quinn Patton in 1994 in *Evaluation Practice*

- "A way of being useful in innovative settings where goals are emergent and changing" with the aims of "innovation, change and learning" (p.138)

Key features

- Close collaborative role the evaluator plays in the evaluation (Patton 2011, Ovretveit 1998, Langlois et al 2013)
- Rapid cyclical application of evaluation findings to improve the initiative (Patton 2011, Ovretveit 1998)
- Purpose-driven, rather than methods-driven, and so can draw upon a wide range of methods, designs and tools (Patton 2011)

Developmental evaluation activity

Stage 1: Plan

- Development of a ‘process framework’
- Identification of three “priority area for development”
    - Stakeholder relationships
    - Best practice in service planning
    - Monitoring and evaluation
- Creation of developmental strategies for each area
- Development of an evaluation framework to measure impact and quality of the implementation of these strategies

Stage 2: Implement

- Stakeholder relationships
- Best practice in service planning
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Progress monitored & reflected upon monthly with subsequent adaptations made to strategies

Stage 3: Interim review

- Aims
    - Track implementation & quality of developments
    - Judge impact of these developments
    - Ascertain next steps
- Online survey & interviews with Strategy Group members & Connect for Kids staff

Stage 4: Re-implement

- Revision of developmental strategies based on interim review conclusions
- Implementation of these revised strategies

Stage 5: Final review

- Aims
    - Understand extent to which developmental evaluation has been implemented
    - Assess the resulting impact it has had on program & stakeholders

Transformation of program

A more robust, evidence-informed and evaluable program:

- Commonly agreed and understood purpose
  - “We’ve got a lot better idea now of what we're trying to achieve” (Strategy Group member)
- Overarching framework
- Process for selecting and/or deleting activities from its suite
- Implementation of these processes e.g. decisions made around which activities to sustain, which to abandon and how to go about identifying new activities
  - “To me, it’s unrecognisable from what it was previously” (Strategy Group member)

Transformation

Shift in thinking of management

Two areas of shifted thinking:

- **Understanding and appreciation of evaluation**
  - How to use program logic and other evaluation tools more effectively
  - The utility of developmental evaluation

- **Understanding of and enthusiasm for place-based approaches, particularly Collective Impact**
  - “I’ve learnt more about what’s effective in place based interventions. I had a superficial knowledge of the cradle to career approaches, but I feel the organisation has increased its knowledge significantly. I’ve learnt a lot in terms of how to work with communities.” (Strategy Group member)

Transformation

Increased capacity to undertake program evaluation by program staff

- Increased understanding of evaluation & skills to be able design basic evaluations of their activities

- Increased appreciation of the value of evaluation
  - “This has changed my opinion of evaluation a lot… more positive, more purposeful” (program staff member)
  - “I’m a changed person, I’m thinking in program logics and evaluation frameworks and plans”! (program staff member)

Enabling conditions

Being open to what emerges

- The evaluator's approach has been to sketch out plans at start & then to add detail, amend & adapt these plans as project evolves, with ultimate aim of supporting development of program
    - "What's made this work is because you guys have been very flexible and the objective of the study has changed quite a bit over time." (Strategy Group member)

Fostering factors

- Education of the Strategy Group by the evaluator around the fact that developmental evaluation requires a flexible approach
- Extension of the project by three months
- Powerful early deliverable of the Connect for Kids process framework

Threats

- Funding timelines

Enabling conditions

Development of strong relationships

- The evaluator purposefully fostered an open & respectful relationship with Strategy Group members and program staff from beginning of project

“I just think also the relationship was important. For that staffing group, the fact that you travelled and made the relationship, it was absolutely right for that group. I think that you just related to them. You related to them as people. It wasn’t about coming and doing the workshop, you actually came in and made relationships with people that meant that people let you in”. (Strategy Group member)

Enabling conditions

Development of strong relationships

Fostering factors

- Involving the client in all aspects of the work
    - Identifying the foci of development with the Strategy Group
    - Planning the strategies with the working parties
    - Co-delivering workshops for the program staff with Strategy Group members
    - Producing program logics and evaluation frameworks for Connect for Kids activities alongside the program staff
- Mediating role of the internal Berry Street evaluator

Threats

- Individual responses to program change

Conclusion

How the story ends

Although the developmental evaluation will soon come to an end, this is not the end of the story

- The client will continue to explore the possibility of a Collective Impact initiative in the region, utilising the process framework

We have all learnt what a powerful method for change developmental evaluation can be, and that being open to what emerges and investing in relationships are both key to its success