

**Gathering an evidence base for value-laden decisions - out of the frying pan and into the ...**

In New Zealand, Australia and around the world, programme providers and funders alike aim is to deliver high quality programmes.<sup>1</sup> Regularly, providers are asked to be innovative and find unusual solutions to local problems that fit closely with the needs of their local communities. As evaluators we are required to work with programme providers, describe programmes and make judgements about whether programmes are ‘successful’. There are many facets to ‘success’ – depending on the value base we use to make these judgements. Characteristics that might be considered as a feature of success range from ‘effective and efficient use of resources’, through to ‘being innovative’, or features such as or ‘being accessible and appropriate for priority populations’.

Contemporary evaluators tend to make judgements about a programme’s worth or value in a transparent way based on ‘good evidence’ available to them, rather than making judgements based on the inherent expertise they have in a particular field or topic area.

For many of us this means not only judging the value or worth of a programme against the ‘success indicators’ or measures agreed with stakeholders of a programme but also means assessing the success, value or worth of the programme against ‘best practice’ or at least a version of this which I regularly hear referred to as ‘accepted good practice’.

The term ‘best practice’ tends to mean based on the evidence in the literature.

While ‘accepted good practice’ is used to refer to the practices typically followed by everyone (locally/in a sector). This appears to be informed by literature but is moved through a number of filters such as professional training courses (the literature may have been adapted by the trainer/educator), adaptations providers make to align the theory with practice (again usually linked back to their own formal training), their own programme reviews/evaluations or action research or the accepted adaptations drawn from their local community or local culture.

My colleagues and I use literature reviews all the time, often when they were not an intended part of the evaluation project. We feel that it is important that the programme design, delivery (and our evaluation of this) is based on good practice not merely good intentions.

I regularly implore, cajole or ‘recommend’ to my public sector clients, usually with quite a lot of success, to add in (and sometimes find additional budget for) a literature review. Which we then use to make judgements about whether best practice is being followed and what needs to change in a programme to improve current practice. We like to think that this means our evaluations are more robust, because we find that literature reviews provide real insight and knowledge, which in turn ensures that as evaluators we are able to add value in every part of the evaluation process.

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<sup>1</sup> Although I talk about ‘programmes’ in the rest of this paper these could just as easily be nationwide (state wide) funding initiatives, strategies or other endeavours that are not discreet, focused “programmes”

On a personal level – I feel armed and safer doing an evaluation with a relevant and up-to-date literature review in my possession. The process of setting up an evaluation is based on building strong relationships and developing a mutual respect for each others' skills and roles. Reading programme documentation as well as a literature review prepares me for the evaluation process. Very knowledgeable programme managers certainly like to determine whether or not an evaluator knows a thing or two about their programme and understands the concepts behind the programme.

A literature review will often provide details about the theory of change underlying similar types of programmes and is then useful in forming the backbone of a logic model or other framework for the evaluation. We do find that while most programmes are based on a theory that has been well understood when the programme was first designed this may be long forgotten or buried in the detail. So much so that programme managers can't always describe it to us unless we draw it out (through workshopping or detailed interviews). Without the literature we may have to describe and assess a programme 'blind' only to determine, at a much later stage, that there is a specific theory base for the programme.

So literature reviews are invaluable when we are doing formative or process (descriptive) evaluations because they provide a framework of best practice features or success factors to look out for and to describe, and they are useful in outcome evaluations as they can provide the basis of a checklist to assess the programme. All of which certainly adds to the focused nature and quality of the evaluation (as well as our credibility as evaluators!)

So with the well-intentioned move away from the non-transparent 'expert evaluator' type judgements about programmes, many practitioners, including myself, colleagues and our clients (programme funders), seek answers in an evidence base developed from the published literature. In doing this, I think it is important for us to consider whose values does this promote? Is the literature really good evidence on which to judge our programmes? Is it this 'best practice' literature that we are really seeking to base our judgements on? My main concern with the literature is that much of the available literature is Eurocentric, and mono-cultural in focus. It just does not transfer well into the unique social, economic, cultural, and political environments of our local communities.

The main question for programme funders, designers, providers and evaluations is "What is 'good evidence'"? As evaluators we are faced with the question of 'whose values count' – those depicted in the international literature or the local values and imperatives?

It certainly makes sense that if we are looking at innovations, and looking at local services for local people that are attractive (accessible) and culturally appropriate, we must consider, and give a significant weight to, the locally held knowledge and local values. So we should use our local knowledge and the locally accepted good practice as a basis for making judgements and decisions about quality, resourcing and ongoing funding. But this is an approach full of pitfalls, programmes can cause harm, they can have unintended impacts – and in reality caution is required in many circumstances. We cannot afford to simply rely on anecdote and hunches, there is a lot to risk and our local peoples and communities should not be guinea pigs. At worst, using an anecdotal basis for action can be harmful. You need to look no further than the behaviour change programmes that were eventually proven to unintentionally prime new behaviours – such as drug education programmes promoting drug use, or suicidal behaviour following a programme focusing on suicide prevention.

Perhaps it just depends on what we are using the evidence base for? At times, surely, it will be obvious that we should just base our design, delivery and evaluation on what is happening internationally. At other times when we are looking more at local needs, cultural issues and innovation, we know to pay more attention to local knowledge and what is accepted locally as good practice.

So, if we are looking at the delivery of a behaviour change programme to a local disadvantaged population that has typically never accessed these types of programmes before and has never been shown to successfully make these types of changes, we would clearly need to consider the local knowledge about working with this population. Success of this type of service would depend on achieving high programme uptake, forming and maintaining client relationships over time, and working with people to develop an internalised desire to change etc. Important skills and approaches that are likely to be useful will be culturally/locally relevant examples of persuasive communication (perhaps using authority figures) and modelling/promoting the desired behaviour in a culturally/locally desirable way. And if we want to know about a dosage based drug therapy or the physiological impact of a harmful behaviour we should just use the international literature, because this would not differ across cultural groups/different communities, right? Well no. There are examples of this not playing out; it is not always that simple. Local populations and local cultures can impact on existing behaviour patterns so much that internationally successful therapies require further adaptation (even things such as dosage may need changing). Drug usage patterns can differ, drivers that promote an existing behaviour over the desired behaviour can differ and therefore effective interventions may be different.

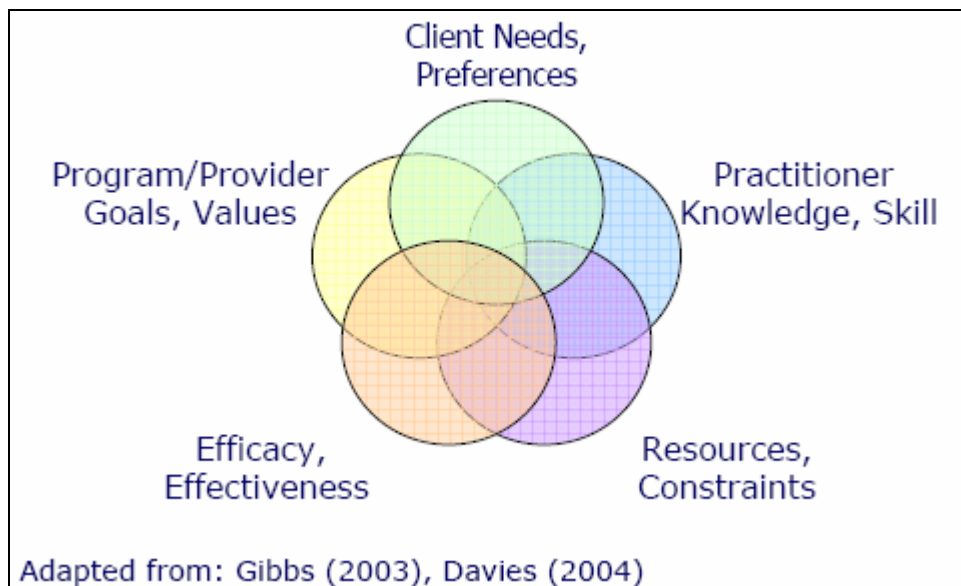
What it comes down to is that, given a specific circumstance, all knowledge can have merit.

The thinking of those working on systematic reviews of the literature such as Julia Littell of the Campbell Collaboration is useful to consider at this point. They consider that 'evidence' of what is best practice for quality programmes comes from a number of sources<sup>2</sup>. Best practice for a high quality programme in the real world comes about through delivery based on the values and skills of a high quality (and adequately resourced) provider being in synergy with the needs and expectations of their client base and the local community.

Littell talks of how both Gibbs (2003) and Davies (2004) described a range of sources that inform best practice, each of which are as important as the others to inform us about delivering quality programmes.

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<sup>2</sup> Discussion and presentation by Prof. Julia Littell, Ministry of Youth Development seminar "What works in Youth Development", Wellington June 24, 2008.



Julia Littell<sup>3</sup>

So local knowledge, local practice and the literature on ‘best practice’ all have their place in providing an evidence base for making value judgements about the programmes. Clearly, we must value many forms of knowledge.

With this way of thinking we need to develop ways that ensure that the learning from both the international and local literature is gathered together and used in ways that ensure locally relevant and culturally sound evidence is given an appropriate level of consideration and is incorporated into our evidence bases.

To do this I believe that we need to work our literature much harder and be innovative and more inclusive of the range of information we gather and review. We cannot afford to do a ‘quick scan’ of a few seminal articles in the literature, but rather we need to do a thorough search of the ‘standard’ as well as the ‘grey’ literature. One of the most significant problems that my colleagues and I face every time we do a literature review is the lack of local literature. So it is particularly important that we hunt out anything that has been written about local programmes (successful or otherwise). To carry out thorough searches and literature reviews we use a range of techniques, none of these is necessarily all that innovative, but the value we find is in combining a number together. Techniques we have been using will be discussed and described in the session. Although they are not particularly costly, they do take some time and resources to carry out.

Our searches are frustrated by the dearth of local literature. As a member of AES and also one of the worlds newest evaluation associations Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association (anzea) I am painfully aware that in New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific that we need to write and share more about what is working in evaluation for our own communities.

As evaluators we need to write down more of what they find out, and find better ways of making this accessible. Evaluators, and indeed programme providers, need to have the appropriate encouragement to report on the use of internationally ‘proven’ models in

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<sup>3</sup> Julia Littell - Invited presentation at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work, St. Louis, MO, 8 May 2007.

*Evidence-based practice. Where's the evidence?* downloaded 27 August 2008:

[http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/papers/JHLittell\\_GWB\\_handouts\\_8May07.pdf](http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/papers/JHLittell_GWB_handouts_8May07.pdf)

our communities. They need to also describe any local adaptation done or required and report the success or failure of the pilot/trial or implementation of the model.

To achieve this I feel that programme funders and purchasers of evaluation and evaluators themselves need to have strategies that ensure wide dissemination of information about programme success and failure. Currently, there appears to be a growing number of 'clearing houses' for local research and literature, at least in New Zealand, but these are of no value if all the most 'interesting' evaluation and research projects are not made public.

At the end of the session questions/discussion about the paper and techniques described will be encouraged.