

Who is being served?

A critical view of national school breakfast program outcomes utilising empowerment evaluation.

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Introduction

Largely in response to program outcome questions we received from folk who attended prior presentations on this study we want to concentrate this time on what if any benefit resulted from the evaluation of this school breakfast program. The conference organisers greatly assisted what we wish to do with the conference theme, *Evaluation: Adding Value*. What value was added to the Good Start Breakfast Club program as a result of the evaluation? Whose interests were served during the course of the evaluation? Whose values drove evaluation agendas and whose interests were served as a result of the evaluation project? And finally, what value has been added to the professional world of evaluation through our experience with this project. We apologise if you decided to attend this session expecting to hear more arguments for and against the use of empowerment evaluation, this is the focus of a later paper.

School breakfast programs

Breakfast programs in schools are predicated on the no-brainer that children and young adults need to eat. In our society the pattern is to eat approximately three times a day. In the context of school there is no contest that eating is required to optimise development and learning potential. But why breakfast at school which typically in the case of children has been a key activity of home-life in the morning? The 1995 Australian National Nutrition Survey (Rutishauser et al, 2001) reported that 7% of children aged 2–11 years, 21% of children aged 12–15 years and 32% of children aged 16–18 years have breakfast less than five times per week. The same survey showed that 5% of households reported living with food insecurity (*In the last 12 months were there times when you ran out of food and you couldn't afford to buy more?*). Around the world this kind of information leads the argument for the provision of breakfast at school followed by other non welfare-related reasons.

Anecdotal reports about the value of school breakfast initiatives abound. Reports from teachers, parents and participating students have consistently pointed to the academic and social benefits of school breakfast programs such as improved behaviour in the classroom, reductions in discipline referrals, improved attendance and increased participation in classroom activities (Cooney and Heitman, 1988; Brown, 1993; Smaller World, 1996; Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, 1998). The literature however is not conclusive about the value of school breakfast programs.

The unclear nature of the link between breakfast and cognition has led one review to question the value of school breakfast programs as a means of promoting child nutrition and academic performance. In a review commissioned by Health Canada, researchers at the Canadian Centre for Studies of Children at Risk said the classroom benefits of eating breakfast are limited primarily to disadvantaged children suffering from either acute or chronic undernourishment and that healthy well-nourished children did not show consistent cognitive benefit (Shaw, Racine and Offord, 1999). Examples of research supporting this assertion is the study by Grantham-McGregor et al (1998) which reported that cognitive function improved in undernourished children when they received a school breakfast, but not in their adequately nourished peers. Similarly, it was nutritionally at-risk boys in Peru who performed better on a vocabulary test after receiving a school breakfast (Cueto et al, 1998).

Undernourishment aside, other studies report that participation improved academic performance and contributed in other areas of school life. A Tufts University School of Nutrition (1994) study found that participants in a school breakfast program showed higher results on standardized achievement tests than non-participants and a number of studies have found that when introduced, school breakfast programs improved attendance and decreased lateness (Tufts University School of Nutrition, 1994; Cueto et al, 1998; Murphy and Pagano et al, 1998; Simeon, 1998).

Important ‘*who is being served questions*’ are asked by MacIntyre et al (1999) in relation to the provision of school feeding programs. Reporting an evaluation of six breakfast programs and three lunch programs at nine sites in Atlantic Canada they found misalignment between the original motivation for starting programs and later justifications for operating. While the initial goal was to feed hungry low-income children, justifications changed over time to helping any family cope with morning time stress; providing nutritious meals for children from all socio-economic levels in a warm, caring atmosphere; helping children viewed as ‘neglected’; and encouraging healthy eating habits.

They observed that those who sponsor programs were likely to take action to perpetuate or at least sustain themselves by broadening their client base; modify their initial goals; formalise and professionalise their structures; become accountable to community boards; have more paid staff; and to consider the use of professional fundraisers. They argued the possibility that program personnel may also attempt to override objections from parents or other family members in order to recruit students into their programs who they perceive to be needy.

So back to our question: *who was served during the course of the evaluation?* First we address the question to the children who participate in the program within schools, then to the broader program infrastructure and finally to the evaluation activity.

For the purpose of this presentation we have chosen to exemplify the activity clearly seen by program personnel from coordinators down, as the most important function of the Good Start Breakfast Club – *the provision of a healthy breakfast to children in need* (See Table 1 for the complete list of program activities chosen for investigation and Table 2 for the evaluation tools developed and trialled during the project). This activity was initially put under the evaluation spotlight by a workshop group made up of volunteers and teaching staff from two schools in Sydney. The subsequent work by three volunteers at a public school on the northern beaches sheds some important light on our question.

Table 1: Key GSBC activities chosen by program personnel for investigation

Workshop group	Key GSBC activity
Sydney A	<i>Providing a healthy breakfast to children in greatest need</i>
Sydney B	Positively changing or influencing the eating habits of children
Western Sydney	Local and school community adopts changed attitudes and behaviour towards breakfast/Gaining community support
Western NSW A	Improving the life skills of children attending the GSBC / Social interaction in GSBC environment
Western NSW B	Recruiting, training and retaining volunteers
Western NSW C	Improving the learning capacity / learning environment of children attending the GSBC

Table 2: Evaluation tools proposed at 6 pilot sites and tools trialled at 4

Location/topic	Methods proposed	Tools trialled
<p>Sydney A (two schools) <i>Providing a healthy breakfast to children in greatest need</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey teachers and volunteers to identify rate of attendance by vulnerable children and any stigma associated with club attendance • Survey children in the school asking about such things as reasons for attending/not attending breakfast club • Record the food eaten at the club on particular days and use a plate waste technique to analyse the average nutrient uptake of children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greatest need and stigma survey • Average nutrient uptake instrument
<p>Sydney B (two schools) <i>Positively changing or influencing the eating habits of children</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A survey conducted in the classroom to compare breakfast eating habits of children attending the breakfast club with other children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food habits survey for breakfast club participants • Food habits survey for non-participants
<p>Western Sydney (one school) <i>Local and school community adopts changed attitudes and behaviour towards breakfast/ Gaining community support</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey children in classrooms asking what they eat for breakfast on weekends and on the days that the club does not operate • Survey participating children’s families, and families of non-participants to show direct or indirect ‘filter effect’ in changing attitudes and behaviour as a result of the breakfast club 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Western Sydney group pulled out of the pilot evaluation process.</i>
<p>Western NSW A (two schools) <i>Improving lifeskills of children/ Social interaction in GSBC</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview participating children who appear to have positively changed their lifeskills and behaviour • Use observation proformas to record children’s behaviour and interactions in the breakfast club to assess changes over time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instrument to conduct systematic observation of social interaction in the GSBC
<p>Western NSW B (one school) <i>Recruiting, training and retaining volunteers</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey breakfast club coordinators about training GSBC volunteers • Survey volunteers about their training experiences, why they became involved and why they stay involved with the club 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Western NSW B group pulled out of the evaluation</i>
<p>Western NSW C (three schools) <i>Improving the learning capacity/ learning environment of children attending the GSBC</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey a sample of teachers and children about breakfast club attendance and changes in social behaviours • Survey G1-2 and G3-6 asking students what they think about breakfast and breakfast club and whether attendance helps them do well at school • Survey high school students about the transition from the primary school’s breakfast club to the high school’s breakfast café 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social behaviour and learning capacity survey for teachers • Breakfast Club and school performance survey for K-2 students • Breakfast Club/Café and school performance survey for high school students

Participating children in Good Start Breakfast Clubs – how were they served by the evaluation? A look at nutrient uptake

Arising from the workshop responsible for devising ways of evaluating the provision of a healthy breakfast to children in need, empowered volunteers at a public school on Sydney's northern beaches choose to develop an *average nutrient uptake instrument* based on the total food consumed in a month divided by the number of meals consumed/students attending in the month, and put it to trial. Independent of outside assistance they developed protocols, collected data for 1 month and presented the raw data for analysis using FoodWorks 4. Following analysis they met with me to discuss the data. They suggested for example that a low consumption of cereal was a problem. Also the amount of spread used did not correlate with the bread consumed with the average of 0.84 of a slice of bread getting a lot of spread. A high usage of honey was confirmed with the group.

The data had provided them with evidence to implement a number of intervention ideas. They would now monitor the honey for example and they could have a look at what would happen to average nutrient uptake when a change is made to wholemeal bread. Vitamin C intake, saturated fat, sugar and protein intake were reviewed and ways they might be able to improve students consumption patterns discussed. One of the volunteers whose qualifications includes nutrition at post-graduate level and who owns and operates a personal fitness training business, said he would like to run the data collection/analysis again. He stated that it had not been a difficult process. Now that wholemeal was the only bread and with a few other adjustments ie 'watch the honey', the group agreed another analysis would be worth doing after a month or two. It was agreed that each subsequent collection would add significantly to their understanding.

The group continued to develop their evaluation processes. They wondered how it might be possible to get a more accurate picture of individual nutrient uptake. Having a tick-the-box sign out sheet where children could indicate what they had eaten for breakfast as they left was thought to be a way of tightening up the accuracy. It was suggested that picture cues could be used. The group reported a computer game - www.MyPyramid.gov was being used at the school in association with the breakfast club. Essentially a game to teach children about good nutrition, it was complementing their work in the breakfast club and generating a lot of good discussion. The group recommended that the trialed instrument was now ready to go to the wider breakfast club community and that they would be interested to see whether there was a ready uptake.

Clearly evidence related to the 'healthy breakfast' component of *Providing a healthy breakfast to children in need* was gathered and reported as a result of the work done at this site. Children attending that club on the northern beaches of Sydney had been well served as a result of the evaluation, with potential being demonstrated for this to be multiplied throughout the program.

The plan by this group of volunteers to make adjustments to the breakfast menu as a result of their preliminary findings was evidence of the evaluation having an effect at the point of delivery. Their intention to reduce the consumption of honey by participating children was a direct result of the findings. Their involvement in data collection and analysis appeared to have generated a very real interest in the nutritional value of the meals they were serving to children and of the instrument's potential to monitor this over time.

Program infrastructure – how was it served by the evaluation? A look at instrument uptake

How was this progress viewed by others involved in the program? Following collection and analysis of the raw data, as evaluation coach and critical friend in the evaluation process I shared it with a nutritionist with one of the partner organisations and invited her to comment on its usefulness. Her response did not endorse the value of the instrument suggesting that the data collected were little more than meaningless. She did not support the idea that average nutrient uptake offered any real idea about what individual children were

consuming, suggesting there would be a large variation in the food choices of participating children and from her reading of the results, they didn't make much sense.

I then shared results with a senior lecturer with qualifications in dietetics, with a much more positive outcome. She pointed out that the 'average meal' result appeared to be quite reasonable with the cereal, bread, milk and juice quantities for the meal falling within a meaningful range. She pointed out that the average amount of honey consumed was well beyond what would be expected to accompany the average quantities of cereal and bread consumed. She was also supportive of the notion that the results could be used to track interventions and to test for at least average changes in nutrient uptake by participating children at a breakfast club.

Clearly these represented contrary viewpoints at the academic/professional level. My own view was that the results from the trial showed considerable promise for this instrument to assist staff at the breakfast club level monitor food choices being made by participating children and to put into place schemes to improve the uptake of nutrients found to be over and/or under represented.

However despite positive outcomes at the pilot site and shared enthusiasm for the instrument, to date this appears not to have translated into take-up of the instrument at the organisational level. In '*Guidelines for Administering the National Good Start Breakfast Club Evaluation*' disseminated in August 2007 by the national program manager for the GSBC program, this instrument was absent. Justification for choosing the three tools included in the Guide from the eight developed in the empowerment evaluation project was, ...*because of their relevance to GSBC goals and their relative ease of implementation.*

The three tools chosen (all good instruments!) and later rolled out in all states were the *Greatest needs and stigma survey*, the *Food habits surveys* (in the guidelines referred to as the *Positively changing and influencing the eating habits of children survey*) and the *Social behaviour and learning capacity survey*. The guidelines stated that,

Broadly these tools aim to measure;

- *Whether or not GSBCs are attracting children in greatest need within the schools*
- *What stigma is associated with attendance at GSBC and what strategies can be employed to address this*
- *What are the main reasons for children attending GSBCs*
- *What, if any impact is GSBC having on the nutritional behaviours of children who attend*
- *What impact is GSBC having on the development of social skills in children who attend*
- *What impact is GSBC having the capacity for children to learn in the classroom.*

The results will be used to assist informing program design, to learn more about those who attend GSBC and to help Red Cross demonstrate the effectiveness of GSBC to the public, government and funding bodies.

Results were reported in the *GSBC National Evaluation Summary 2007* published by Australian Red Cross. However the report featured two of the three surveys just mentioned with no results reported for the food habits/positively changing or influencing the eating habits of children survey. The report was entirely based on responses received from approximately 150 teachers involved with breakfast clubs in 7 states and territories who reported their perceptions about the provision of breakfast to children at their school and the benefits being derived by children participating in the program.

Little real evidence appears to have been gathered about one of the dot points just mentioned - the impacts of having breakfast at a GSBC on the nutritional behaviours of participants.

An alternative position would be to recommend to the program managers to take the cue from our volunteers at the northern beaches school. If personnel at each club undertake normal procedural expectations associated with breakfast club operations, 1) keeping accurate stock records and 2) keeping accurate attendance records, they have the information at each site to have a look at average nutrient uptake at each meal and to make informed assessments about the food choices of the children they serve.

As an aside, I did what I think was an interesting little calculation using information derived from the October-December 2007 GSBC quarterly report. From the table showing food donated to the program by Sanitarium for the quarter, I divided that by the meals reported to have been consumed in the same period. Making some semi-informed guesses to do with the number of boxes in cartons, 2,325,000 grams of cereal products were delivered and if we extrapolate that as what might have been consumed at the 123,552 meals reported, we have 18.81 grams of cereal or approximately the weight of one Weet-bix (16.5 grams) contributing to the morning nutrition of the average kid in attendance! Not scientifically reliable, but an interesting indicator of impact.

Evaluation activity – who was served by the evaluation. A look at capacity building, organisation learning and accountability.

Capacity building:

The desire of the volunteers at the northern beaches school to follow up the initial trial with an investigation of the effect of the change to wholemeal bread and the reduced consumption of honey was an early demonstration of the empowerment evaluation process developing capacity to do evaluation at the volunteer level of the program.

One other site demonstrated evaluation capacity development at the time of the project. This evaluation team comprised two volunteers and the principals at a primary school and high school located in a large regional town of Western NSW. They were actively involved in the development and trial of three survey instruments, the *Social behaviour and learning capacity survey for teachers* (used in the national evaluation), *Breakfast Club and school performance survey for K-2 students* and *Breakfast Club/Café and school performance survey for high school students*.

When we met to review the results of the trials there was discussion of what use could be made of what had been learned. For example, responses about their breakfast eating habits from 110 of their Grade 7-9 high school students gave rise to discussion of an advertising campaign being needed to promote the breakfast café service they offer because in spite of this service being available in the school, only 61% or 67 of the 110 students reported eating something before school every day and on the day of the survey 16% or 18 students reported having not eaten breakfast that day.

Similar results were found elsewhere during the trial period. Responses from 135 Grade 2-8 students at an inner-city school in Sydney to questions on the *Food habits survey*, showed a high incidence of breakfast skipping behaviour in that population in spite of a breakfast club operating at their school. On the day of the survey 14% reported eating nothing before school that morning, with the respondent group including 6 out of 18 in Grade 2. A high 57% reported sometimes skipping breakfast on school days.

In the post-trial discussion with the breakfast club coordinating teacher, a club volunteer and the national breakfast club coordinator from Australian Red Cross, the integrity of the *Food habits survey* instrument received considerable attention, with adverse findings such as these being argued as possibly being associated with a less than perfect survey instrument. A more reasoned response may be that the presence of a breakfast program in a school may not be having the effect desired – to ensure all children eat before engaging

in the learning process. It was also with some interest that I observed that the *food habits* survey was included in the national evaluation rollout in spite of questions of its integrity.

Organisational learning:

Did the evaluation serve to assist those in Red Cross responsible for the delivery of this community-based, dispersed and diverse initiative, to be a community of learners able to continually reflect on and evaluate their breakfast club program? Are they any better off in this regard as a result of the evaluation project?

As reported previously (Miller and Lennie, 2005a, 2005b; Miller, Lennie and Yeatman, 2006), the use of the empowerment evaluation approach with GSBC program personnel resulted in the assembly of a large amount of baseline data about the program during 2005/6. Empowerment evaluation as ‘evaluation tool’ demonstrated considerable value as an appropriate vehicle for collecting these data and the mostly positive feedback from personnel involved in the evaluation process confirmed the alignment of the principles of empowerment evaluation with the objectives of the program. It would be nice to report that empowerment evaluation has bedded down as the ‘*go-to*’ modus operandi used by Red Cross to monitor program activities, but such a result appears to have eluded us. Instead at the organisational level there has been one follow-up project utilising two evaluation instruments developed during our project.

Accountability:

Empowerment evaluation seeks to encourage and make possible internal accountability (Fetterman, 2005). Assessing the level of commitment to accountability in this evaluation project, it is useful to view it from the perspective of my involvement (and expert evaluator assistants), the GSBC community (including Red Cross) and Sanitarium (see Table 3). I have assigned high, medium and low accountability scores in light of criteria suggested by Fetterman. (2005, p. 71-72).

Table 3 Commitment to accountability demonstrated in practice by evaluator, GSBC community and funder

Accountability	
The role of the evaluator (and team):	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Trains community members to hold themselves accountable 2. Places the evaluation in the hands of community members to enable them to learn to hold themselves accountable 3. Holds the funder accountable for agreements with the community in terms of community control of the evaluation (and program implementation) 4. Serves as a coach rather than dominating or controlling the evaluation
High:	
Medium:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. <i>150 program personnel contributed to the empowerment evaluation with 43 being directly involved in planning the development and dissemination of evaluation instruments designed to gather data about the key program activities chosen for investigation however holding themselves accountable for ongoing evaluation was not widely demonstrated.</i> 4. <i>Mixed success was achieved as evaluation coach. When early enthusiasm demonstrated at pilot sites diminished I had to mostly take over development of all but one of the evaluation instruments to avoid the project stalling.</i>
Low:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Training of GSBC community members in empowerment evaluation and in the use of the evaluation tools developed was not able to be implemented in a way that would foster sustainability of the early promise the evaluation process demonstrated.</i> 3. <i>The major sponsor instigated the evaluation project and with the program manager agreed to support the use of the empowerment evaluation approach. However tension developed when community participants in the evaluation appeared to be driving the evaluation agenda. This made it difficult to hold the funder and program manager accountable for earlier agreements that had been made.</i>

The role the GSBC community:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Holds each member accountable for implementing the program and conducting the evaluation 2. Holds the evaluator accountable for serving as a coach and critical friend and not dominating or controlling the direction or implementation of the evaluation 3. Holds the funder accountable for governance and ownership agreements (<i>I was not privy to such discussions but it is interesting to note that toward the end of 2007 Coles replaced Sanitarium as major sponsor of the GSBC program</i>)
High:	<i>1. Strong commitment to accountability was demonstrated by volunteers at a northern beaches pilot site and by volunteers and principals at one site in Western NSW.</i>
Medium:	<i>2. Some involved in the evaluation at pilot sites expressed that they would be happy for me to take control, particularly of the development of evaluation instruments. Others expressed that had I taken control they would not have been so inclined to be part of the process.</i>
Low:	<i>1. The program manager was unable to guarantee commitment to the evaluation process by all within the GSBC community.</i>

The role of the major sponsor:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Holds the community accountable for promised results 2. Holds the evaluator accountable for assisting the community in accomplishing its objectives 3. Holds itself accountable for supporting these efforts in a manner that is realistic and obtainable
High:	<i>3. The commitment to evaluation results by the major sponsor was demonstrated by providing significant unbudgeted funding for the evaluation work done at six pilot sites toward the end of 2006.</i>
Medium:	
Low:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Toward the end of the project, in spite of the efforts of the major sponsor and the evaluation team it seemed that commitments made by the program managers with respect to evaluation results were not to eventuate.</i> 2. <i>Early enthusiasm for trial results and development of a sustainable evaluation methodology appears to have given way to using selected evaluation results for short term promotional gains.</i>

In summary:

This paper has reported program effects which occurred during an evaluation of the Good Start Breakfast Club. Positive effects included clear involvement of volunteers and teachers in data assembly. There is no doubt that improvements were made at the point of delivery and that evaluation capacity was created in program personnel at the breakfast club. Indications were that some of the products of the evaluation were being utilised. However commitment at all levels to evaluation promises had diminished. In addition evaluation results appear to be used for promotional purposes rather than to improve program delivery.

Conclusion

What does this tell about empowerment evaluation and program outcomes? First, the interesting processes of empowerment evaluation resulted in many reports detailing baseline information about the program, evaluation plans, and preliminary results from pilot site work. However to date evaluation reports unfortunately outweigh program outcomes impacted as a result of the evaluation project. Second, where improved program outcomes did occur, I believe the empowerment evaluation approach played a significant part in that success. Third, the important program outcomes identified for investigation, the practical tools developed for doing evaluation on those outcomes and work accomplished at trial sites, reflects the keen interest of many staff in the evaluation of their program and ultimately the welfare of the children they serve.

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