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Rethinking the evaluative process: exploring co-constructive research relationships

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Presentation overview

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Evaluation and the evaluator

Traditional view of evaluation and the evaluator

- external, expert, 'neutral' evaluator
- applying technical tools 'objectively'
- assessing / measuring effectiveness or outputs in a given setting (Gregory 2000; Morabito 2002)
- one-way exchange of information up to evaluator (Cartland, Ruch-Ross, Mason and Donohue 2008).

Generates evidence that is

Evaluation and the evaluator

Reliable

Rigorous

Valid

Impartial

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Evaluation and the evaluator

Sound methodology critical to ensuring accountability in program evaluation (Benjamin 2008)

BUT

In appropriate contexts, responsive, dialogic approach to:

- process of evaluation
- participants in evaluation

Can lead to

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Benefits for participants and stakeholders

Benefits for evaluators

Sound, credible evidence

Background to case study - SDN Children's Services

104-year old, not-for-profit organisation providing:

- early education and care services in NSW and ACT
- family support services
- early childhood early intervention
- consultancy and resourcing to early childhood professionals and families
  - ➤ 8 evaluation and research projects within Child, Family and Children's Services Programs (CFCSP)

Embedded vs external evaluators

- Intensive, daily, contact - working out of same offices as participants
- 'Embedded' vs external approach :
  - Build trusting relationships - maximise participation / minimise sense of coercion
  - Allow practitioners to collaborate closely in design / implementation of evaluation process and outcomes
  - Opportunity for reflection on / greater visibility of underlying theory in practice (Wong 2009)

Evaluators' own philosophies

- Early childhood pedagogy
  - Vygotsky – co-construction (Goldstein 1999)
  - Reggio Emilia – image of the child (Rinaldi 2005)
- Social constructionism
- Strong knowledge and experience research design and principles contributing to sound evidence
- Feminist/social justice orientation
  - ➢ 'image of participants' - equal partners in a process of meaning-making, about a context in which they are the experts

Philosophies embedded in the setting

- Strengths-based perspectives
  - Respect for peoples' intrinsic worth, rights, capacities, uniqueness and commonalities.
  - Sharing of information and 'knowledge', resources, skills, decision-making.
  - Collaboration: teamwork and partnership, consultation and inclusion.
  - Social Justice: equity, access, 'equality'; participation, self-determination,
  - Transparency: having things out in the open; open information and communication. (McCashen 2005)

Philosophies embedded in the setting

- Reflective practice (Schon 1983; Ruch 2000; Wesley and Buysse 2001)
  - Identifying and challenging assumptions, and considering effects of practices, in order to increase understanding and insight
- Family-centred practice (Allen and Petr 1996; RCH 2003)
  - Services provided flexibly, based on needs and priorities of each family
  - Family considered 'expert' and equal partner in planning and delivery of services

Developing a responsive, dialogic approach

Moving beyond observing/evaluating to:

- Conciously engaging our own philosophical positions vs objective/neutral evaluator stance
- absorbing/adopting philosophies and practices from setting vs observing them

A methodological aside…

Both participant observation (PO) and action research (AR) important influence on 'embedded' role / responsive, collaborative style :

- PO – "empathetic immersion in the daily life and meaning systems of those studied" (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2001)
- AR – involves participants in design and conduct of evaluation/research, to facilitate change that is directly useful to them (David 2001; Reason 2001)
- Responsive/co-constructive approach blends these methodologies , but key difference is
  - ➤ takes up the particular philosophies embedded in the setting, not just representing them (PO) or objectively facilitating process of change (AR).

Case Study 1 – SDN PlayLinks

Investigation of supported playgroup for families and their children with disabilities

- Direct contact with children and families in position of vulnerability while working as part of playgroup staff
- Adopted strengths-based, family-centred approach used by practitioners during 10 weeks of sessions + 4 reflective practice sessions
- One-on-one interviews with staff (x 4)

(Cumming & Wong 2008a)

Case Study 1 – SDN PlayLinks

Evaluation process contributory vs 'taking'
- supporting continuity of experience of families attending program/contributing to program goal to empower.
- Modelling critical reflective practice /integration of theory

High quality data
- working alongside practitioners develops deeper understanding of practice issues
- developing genuine relationships over time with families and staff leads to greater trust
- Triangulation of sources eg evaluators' experience + parent perspective + reflective practice by team

Case study 2 – SDN Inclusion Support Agencies

ISA staff interested in evaluation of how strengths-based approaches were being applied across the 3 ISAs

- Focus of evaluation, and evaluation measure emerged from consultation sessions with managers and practitioners - Suggested using 5 principles sba's as basis for evaluation
- Evaluation included: interviews with practitioners (x11); phone surveys of children's services receiving ISA support (x100); satisfaction surveys (x199); observation at team/reference group meetings (x12); and field visits (x4).

(Cumming & Wong 2008b)

Case study 2 – SDN Inclusion Support Agencies

Responsive, co-constructive approach
- Evaluators applied sba to practitioners
- Practitioners treated as experts (eg suggesting highly relevant measure vs existing, less contextually-relevant measures)

High quality data
- Multiple sources of data triangulated across multiple sites and from multiple perspectives (Lennie 2006)
  - highly convergent data
  - evidence generated highly specific and relevant to their own context
  - high level of reliability and rigor

Challenges for participants/organisation

- Allowing time out of busy working days for staff to participate in discussion, reflection, collaboration.
- Commitment to engage at a much deeper level about themselves and their work than might normally be expected/required in program evaluation
- Varying levels of willingness to change practice in response to process and findings of evaluation.

Benefits for participants/organisation

- Participants gained broader perspective on their work through engaging with the theory embedded in it
- Connection with evaluation projects via participation and collaboration meant practitioners and organisation:
  - more willing to accept and implement findings
  - increased capacity to undertake evaluation themselves
- Seeing that their work was 'worthy' of evaluation, and because of responsive, co-constructive approach used for evaluation, practitioners felt validated and appreciated. (Wong 2009)

Challenges for evaluators

Level of commitment to participants and work created more pressure to:

- 'get it right' – most accurate representation possible, to honour the work of participants
- especially rigorous and ethical in approach - better data but probably put in many more hours than might normally be allowed by evaluators for such projects

Concerns that as new evaluators, taking a more 'radical' approach might have repercussions for our professional future.

Benefits for evaluators

- Opportunity to learn about / apply strengths-based, inclusive, reflective practices complementary to our philosophical positions.

- 'Closeness' to setting and participants meant we had high degree of confidence in reliability of evidence generated, and in how accurately it represented dynamics in the setting.

Challenges for generating quality evidence

Pressure to balance standards for 'good' evidence with what might be 'good' for stakeholders

- Desire to provide honest, accurate, useful findings for participants/stakeholders, while also wanting evidence to be viewed as credible and rigorous to external audiences, and therefore influential in the broader professional arena.

Benefits for quality of evidence

- Depth of trust and interest developed via close working relationships with evaluators positively influenced participants to take part in evaluations.
- Greater understanding of mechanics of program approaches (eg fcp) via experiencing them ourselves / observing alongside colleagues
  - ➤greater analytical insight - view through 'practitioner' lens as well as view through 'evaluator' lens

Limits of this approach in other settings

Responsive / co-constructive approach less suitable for projects where:
  - Trust difficult to establish, and if there is minimal culture of reflexivity, honesty and openness to change
  - Nature of the evaluation has potential to threaten organisational stability or employment
  - Organisation/participants not committed to/unable to give extensive time to collaborative approach.

Conclusion

Using a responsive, dialogic approach appropriate to this context, has generated evidence that is:

Ethically produced

highly representative of work in the setting

highly relevant to the commissioning stakeholders and participants

BUT ALSO

good quality and credible

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