Facilitating change: a utilisation-focused evaluation of early childhood intervention programs

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Utilisation-focussed evaluation as a framework to understand a positive project

- A very positive evaluation project
  - Strong client relationships
  - Evaluation findings are being used to shape research and policy

- Was it good management or just good luck?
  - Complex evaluation, with potential for data disaster

- Utilisation-focussed evaluation (UFE) as a framework for interpreting success
  - UFE: How people in the 'real world' experience the process of evaluation and apply evaluation findings [Quinn Patton, 2002]
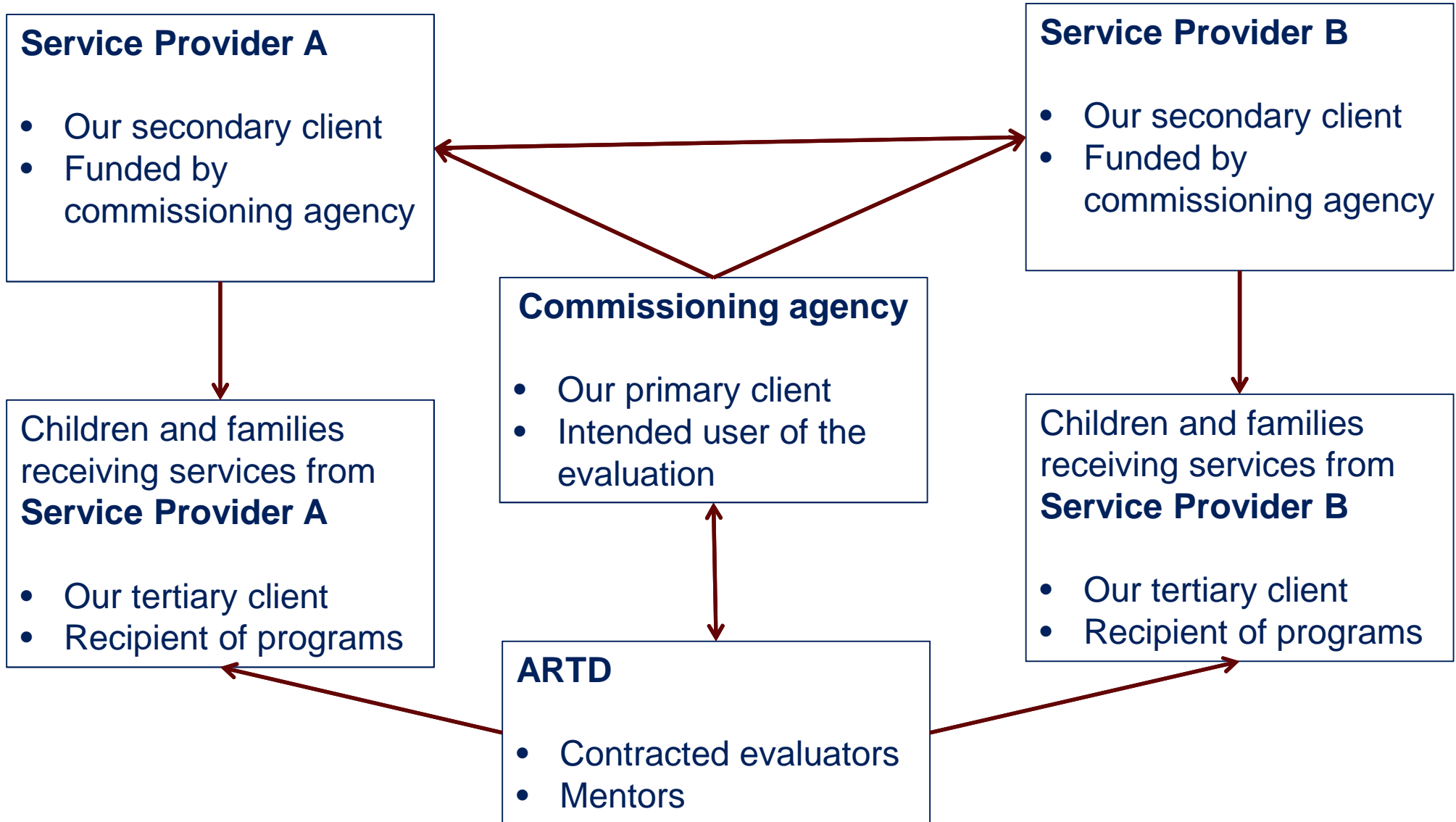
The program under evaluation

- A relatively complex subject and operating context
  - Changing national focus on disability service provision
  - Overlapping Commonwealth and state investment
  - Four early childhood intervention programs delivered by two service providers

- Service delivery already occurring when the evaluation was commissioned
  - Evaluation design and methods constrained
  - Limited outcomes data available ('Yes, we're measuring outcomes...')

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Utilisation-focussed evaluation checklist

Quinn Patton, 2002

1. Assess program/organisational readiness
2. Assess evaluator readiness and capability
3. Identify primary intended users
4. Do situational analysis
5. Identify primary intended use
6. Focus the evaluation
7. Design the evaluation
8. Simulate its use
9. Collect data
10. Analyse data
11. Facilitate its use
12. Do meta-evaluation

Step 3: Identify intended *users*

Service Provider A

- Our secondary client
- Funded by commissioning agency

Service Provider B

- Our secondary client
- Funded by commissioning agency

Commissioning agency

- Our primary client
- Intended user of the evaluation

Children and families receiving services from **Service Provider A**

- Our tertiary client
- Recipient of programs

Children and families receiving services from **Service Provider B**

- Our tertiary client
- Recipient of programs

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- Contracted evaluators
- Mentors

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Step 5: Identifying primary intended *uses*

- Contribute to program *improvement* and *development*
  - Illustrating what worked for whom, in what circumstances (improvement)
  - Giving ideas about service mix (development)

- Develop relationships
  - Between our primary client and the funded service provider
  - Between the service providers
  - Between ourselves and our client
  - Between ourselves and the service providers
  - Between ourselves and the clients of the service providers

Step 1: Assess program or organisational readiness

- Primary clients were committed to useful evaluation
  - evaluation was well funded
  - keen to understand how programs contributed to childrens' development, in context of broader research literature

- Secondary clients (service providers) were also committed
  - keen to see how their program was performing
  - service providers responsible for evaluation payments, brought into Evaluation Working Group

Step 2: Assess evaluator readiness and capability

- Area of service delivery requires understanding of particular disability and its affect on children and their families

- Our team had
    - experience in the area, as practitioner and evaluators
    - understanding of the importance of involving service providers
    - awareness of the potential conflicts between service providers

Step 4: Do situational analysis

- Political context—changing environment of disability service provision
  - Our ability to control that environment was limited

- Identify potential barriers and ways to overcome

Barrier	Enabler
Service providers have limited time for anything other than direct service provision	• Service providers want to know what their data says • Some additional funds available to support data entry

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Step 7. Design the evaluation

- Service delivery and data collection already occurring (limited opportunity to choose evaluation design, measurement instruments)
  - Start using common instruments, but lose data?
  - Continue using same instruments, but lose consistency?

- Consulting with service providers to use their expertise
  - Helped our own understanding
  - Gained 'buy in' from service providers

Step 6: Focus the evaluation

- What data is available?
- What data do service providers value?
- Will the data items allow us to answer the key evaluation questions?
- How equivalent is the data?
- How will we use the data?
- Do we need to collect any other data?

Step 8. Simulate use

- Develop online data entry tool
  - Use literature to inform development
  - Service providers involved in review and piloting

- Generate dummy output
  - Evaluators explore data analysis options—what's possible, what's practical?
  - Service providers invited to give feedback to ensure analysis is theoretically relevant and meaningful

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Step 9. Collect data

- Being available to service providers throughout data entry
  - Technical support—even on the weekends!
  - Emotional support—data entry is tough!

- Deciding on how to tackle problems together

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Step 10. Analyse data

- Focusing data analysis on the intended use
    - Change across key developmental areas
    - What works for whom, under what circumstances

- Actively involving clients in interpreting findings
    - Workshop discussion with clients (primary and secondary) to discuss interim evaluation report

Step 11. Facilitate use (change)

- Primary clients have
  - information needed to develop research agenda and future service mix

- Service providers have
  - a record of how their programs make a difference
  - ideas about areas of programs that need improvement
  - a way of getting access to their data
  - understanding about the importance of systematic evaluation data collection

Conclusions: What worked for us?

- We were committed to involving our clients in the evaluation by
  - building strong, open and effective working relationships
  - ensuring service providers got value from the arduous task of data entry
  - understanding what service providers do and why its important, and reflecting that in our report
- It meant that
  - service providers felt heard, respected and fairly represented in our findings
  - our client established a way of working with service providers beyond the traditional funder–fundee relationship