BUILDING CAPACITY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT THROUGH EVALUATION: EXPERIENCES OF THE MANITOBA SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM INC.

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Abstract: The evolution of the Manitoba School Improvement Program’s (MSIP) approach to evaluation as a means of building schools’ capacity for continuous improvement will be described from the perspective of the MSIP evaluation consultant and in the context of the difficulties inherent in secondary school reform. Drawing on the experiences of the MSIP schools and the data that have been collected by and from the schools over the last seven years, this article will attempt to address two key questions: What have we learned about how to move schools into an empowerment model of evaluation? What are the benefits of empowerment evaluation to educational reform?

L’évolution de l’approche du programme d’amélioration des écoles du Manitoba (MSIP) à l’évaluation comme outil d’amélioration de la capacité des écoles de s’améliorer en permanence est décrite du point de vue du consultant chargé d’évaluer le MSIP et dans le contexte des difficultés inhérentes à la réforme des écoles secondaires. Fondé sur les expériences des écoles participant au MSIP et sur les données recueillies par et dans les écoles au cours des sept dernières années, cet article tente de répondre à deux questions clés: Qu’avons-nous appris au sujet de la façon d’amener les écoles à adopter un modèle d’évaluation de l’habilitation? Quels sont les avantages de l’évaluation de l’habilitation pour la réforme de l’éducation?

The Manitoba School Improvement Program Inc. (MSIP) has always believed that thoughtful reflection, based on data, helps build a school’s capacity to sustain improvement. Since MSIP’s inception in 1991, I have worked as the MSIP Evaluation Consultant helping schools understand the value of evaluation and how they can use data to inform their decision making. While the underlying belief about the importance of evaluation has not changed through-
out MSIP’s history, the approach has evolved over the seven years of the program’s existence. This article will trace its maturation.

Underlying the discussion is the concept that stakeholder participation in evaluation exists along a continuum. The Manitoba School Improvement Program Inc. began with a participatory approach that involved stakeholders beyond simply having input. Teachers were expected to become the “owners and doers” of their own school-based evaluation processes, although they had access to significant support from an evaluation professional. Over time, teachers in some schools have taken extensive ownership of the evaluation process, something for which, historically, they have not had responsibility. This has truly empowered teachers to be key players in transforming their schools. However, the next step along the continuum is to involve students as evaluators, thus empowering the group that has the most stake in educational reform, but is, at the same time, the most likely to be disenfranchised.

Drawing on my perspective as the MSIP evaluation consultant and the data that have been collected by and from schools, this article will attempt to address two fundamental questions: What have we learned about how to move schools into an empowerment model of evaluation? What are the benefits of empowerment evaluation to educational reform?

BACKGROUND — THE MANITOBA SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM INC.

The Manitoba School Improvement Program Inc. (MSIP) came into being as a result of the vision of the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, a Canadian charitable foundation (hereafter referred to as the Foundation). The Foundation supported school-based improvement projects designed to help students at greatest risk in terms of remaining in school or fulfilling their individual educational potential. After a lengthy research and consultation process, the Foundation determined that the most effective way to encourage improvement in secondary education was to support innovation at the school level. The Foundation’s approach assumed that students in Canada would be best served in the long term if the conditions under which they learn were improved. Schools were expected to focus on changing the situation rather than “fixing” the student. In 1991, the Foundation selected Manitoba as a testing ground for learn-
ing whether creative change in schools could lead to school-wide improvement and, ultimately, enhanced opportunities for youth.

Manitoba was a fitting place for the Foundation to test their approach to school improvement that would benefit at-risk youth. There was no shortage of young people in at-risk situations in Manitoba. For example, the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth reported that, while one-quarter of Canadian children aged 0-11 lived in households with incomes below the low income cut-off, “children in Newfoundland, Manitoba and Nova Scotia were most likely to live in low-income families” (“Canadian Children in the 1990s: Selected Findings of the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth,” Statistics Canada, 1997, p. 3). However, students at risk were not the only consideration for the Foundation. The provincial government (Manitoba Education and Training) was receptive to the Foundation’s initiative and was willing to provide office space and other in-kind support. In addition, the Assistant Deputy Minister of Education provided her professional expertise on the Foundation’s Education Advisory Committee.

Manitoba was also appealing because of its size and geographic characteristics. The province has approximately one million people, of which 195,000 are school age. Therefore, Manitoba was large enough to have a sufficient number of schools that might be interested in embarking on innovation, but was small enough to be manageable as a pilot site given the financial and human resources available from the Foundation. With approximately half the population in one centre, Winnipeg, an urban focus still allowed for an ample number of potential schools in the initial stages.

To date, the Foundation has invested more than $5 million in innovative secondary school reform projects. However, in addition to receiving multi-year grants, MSIP schools receive professional and technical support from MSIP for skill building, including support for program evaluation. A full-time program coordinator and the part time evaluation consultant were major components of the infrastructure the Foundation put in place to stimulate school reform.

The reform initiative begun by the Foundation has become the Manitoba School Improvement Program Inc. In 1997, MSIP began the transition to becoming a non-profit, non-governmental, independent organization. While the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation will continue to be a financial supporter for the next few years, MSIP
is seeking enabling grants from the provincial government, Manitoba charitable foundations, as well as community and educational organizations. MSIP is unique in Canada as an independent organization dedicated to improving opportunities for young people through the vehicle of educational reform. MSIP is also unique in its focus on evaluation as a key aspect of the process. Since inception, MSIP has taken the approach, to quote Fetterman (1996), of using “evaluation concepts, techniques and findings to foster improvement and self-determination.”

THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT APPROACH TO EDUCATIONAL REFORM

The use of a school improvement approach is also important to understand in the context of MSIP and its focus on evaluation. School improvement is a term generally used to describe broad-based school reform initiatives where the locus of change is the school itself. In assuming that the school is the unit of change, it is necessary for the school as an organization to engage in “a variety of strategies and processes designed to enhance organizational learning capacity and generative and adaptive knowledge bases” (Cousins & Earl, 1995). Program evaluation has been viewed as one of a possible array of the organizational strategies designed to add to this knowledge base.

School improvement has at its core, however, the purpose of enhancing student learning outcomes. In conjunction with this central objective is the creation of a collaborative learning culture (where teachers support one another in improving their own practice), coupled with the development of skills and strategies that build the school’s capacity for successfully managing change.

Some well-known school improvement models include the American experiences with Accelerated Schools, the Coalition for Essential Schools, the League of Professional Schools, and the School Development Model, as well as England’s Improving Quality Education for All (IQEA) project. These models have a number of characteristics in common with MSIP. For example, all focus on improving student learning, empowering teachers, connecting school and community, partnering with organizations external to the school, establishing a common vision for the school, embarking on a planning process to support continuous improvement, and using evaluation processes (also known as “inquiry and reflection” and/or “action
research”). Expectations and actual practices for evaluation are variable among the school improvement models, although all encourage some form of ongoing inquiry and reflection, usually to inform the planning process.

From the beginning, the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation wanted to test a school improvement approach where planning and evaluation were integral, and required, elements of school reform. Having an on-site evaluator resulted from a belief that thoughtful reflection, based on data, would help schools clarify, challenge, and target their own work. In turn, this would build the capacity of the school to generate and use its own knowledge. The MSIP evaluation consultant, with the support of the Foundation, the program’s Education Advisory Committee, and the MSIP coordinator, instituted an approach to evaluation that was consistent with this belief. It is perhaps important to note that the Education Advisory Committee has included a number of prominent Canadian academics who work in the areas of school improvement and educational evaluation. Andy Hargreaves was the first chair of the Foundation’s Education Advisory Committee with J. Bradley Cousins and Louise Stoll as original members. The later incarnation of the Education Advisory Committee had Michael Fullan as chair and Lorna Earl as a committee member.

The evaluation approach adopted by MSIP has been a significant factor in promoting school improvement in Manitoba. MSIP believes that having teachers who are the “owners and doers” of their own evaluation processes is indeed a powerful tool in stimulating and sustaining significant school improvement. The MSIP journey will help to illuminate what factors and actions assist in the successful implementation of an empowerment evaluation approach that builds schools’ capacity to sustain continuous improvement.

THE CHALLENGE OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

In setting the context for the discussion of MSIP’s evaluation approach, it is important to be aware of both the difficulties that have dogged educational reform and the role that educational research and evaluation has played historically. From early on, the Foundation was aware that educational reform has been plagued by failure — or at best limited success. Foundations in the United States have invested many millions of dollars in schools, while governments across North America have attempted reform through legislation,
changes to policy, and testing programs. There has been an increasing recognition that schools need to be more engaging and relevant places for adolescents if they are to leave high school prepared for the 21st century. However, the majority of secondary schools look very much as they did in the 1950s, with the notable exception of the presence of new technologies. “Talk and chalk” has been replaced with, as one innovative teacher aptly described the situation, “an overhead projector strapped to the teacher’s hip.” While there are many innovative and exciting teachers in Canadian public schools, the culture and structures of the traditional high school mitigate against significant change.

Sarason (1990), in *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*, explored the inadequacies of educational reform efforts. In his deliberations, he addresses the basic understandings that should inform the implementation of any reform initiative — the theoretical and the contextual. Both are required if reform is to be conceptualized and successfully implemented.

These two basic problems or understandings are not independent of each other. Each is actually within the other. The weaver of the conceptual framework is at the same time the “knower” of the context. Unfortunately, too many times the weaver of the framework is unaware how inadequately he knows the context. He or she assumes a degree of understanding the limits of which only become clear when implementation fails. (pp. 122–123)

Sarason argues that while there has been no shortage of educational research, it has been informed by a “superficial comprehension of the contexts in which educational problems or phenomena arise.”

It is when the conclusions of research become the basis of action in seemingly similar contexts that the powering imagery is illuminated: you apply the conclusions, you deliver the knowledge, you perform the operation as if the object of it is a passive, anesthetized patient. It is a problem in application only if it derives from and rests on how well you have answered a prior basic question: how well do you understand the culture of the context in which the problem arose and in which you seek to intervene? Our inadequate answers to that question explain a good deal about the failures of educational reform. (pp. 129–130)
The person best placed, it would seem, to understand the overt and covert contexts are people working within those contexts. However, many teachers have neither the training nor technical expertise to conceptualize and undertake evaluation. Training in program evaluation is rarely a component of teacher education programs. While newer teachers may have had exposure to action research in their training, most teachers in Manitoba high schools graduated from faculties of education more than 20 years ago. If teachers have had direct contact with program evaluation, it has likely been when an external evaluator has come in to evaluate a particular program in order to determine whether the program should be continued or terminated. Not surprisingly, this has often encouraged teachers to fear evaluation and to conceal truths about the struggles that are inherent in implementation processes. Working in the capacity of an evaluator in conceptualizing evaluation plans, followed by the collection, analysis, interpretation, and use of data, is a new role for virtually all teachers.

THE EVOLUTION OF MSIP’S APPROACH TO EVALUATION

The chronicle that follows breaks the evolution of MSIP’s evaluation approach into three phases. Each phase is marked by some systematic and overarching inquiry regarding the Manitoba School Improvement Program. Throughout the development of MSIP, I have acted as the evaluation consultant to schools. However, I have also been involved in the three research endeavours, in each case as the MSIP evaluation consultant teamed with an external evaluator(s). This dual role has provided me the unique opportunity to work at program evaluation for MSIP on two levels.

In the Beginning — A Participatory Approach

In early 1991, I was contacted by the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation. They were looking for someone to assume the role of evaluation consultant as part of their school improvement project in Manitoba. In our initial discussions, I wanted to be clear with the Foundation about my own approach to program evaluation. I had worked with schools when conducting external evaluations, but also in consultative or support roles. Having spent five years in a school district as an evaluation consultant, I had developed a certain perspective. I was very much concerned with utilization of evaluation results and particularly with the need for those delivering programs to understand the importance of program evaluation. My experi-
ence had led me to believe that, if educators saw value in evaluation, they would use results — and they were more likely to see the value if they had a stake in the process. As Renzulli noted in the 1980s: “Unless persons being evaluated can see some value and benefit for themselves as a result of participating in an evaluative study, they are likely to approach the process half-heartedly; or even worse, they may actually try to distort information” (1984, p. 2).

In the case of the Foundation’s initiative, I believed that evaluation would be best used to support and advance schools’ improvement efforts. People in the schools needed to take ownership for the evaluation of their school’s initiative to inform their own planning and decision making. If the evaluation process was focused, systematic, and adhered to accepted evaluation methods (with the appropriate technical support in place), I saw no reason why the data collected by schools could not also be used for accountability purposes.

My approach was consistent with the Foundation’s desire to have schools take ownership for evaluation. It was also philosophically compatible with how the Foundation defined its role — as an active external facilitator and catalyst, whose staff would work closely with educators to make significant and systemic change. The Foundation became one of my clients, purchasing a portion of my time to support the schools in their evaluation efforts as well as the program overall.

In terms of my role with the schools, it was conceptualized in a manner also consistent with Cousins’ and Earl’s definition of participatory evaluation: “By participatory evaluation we mean applied social research that involves trained evaluation personnel (or research) specialists and practice-based decision makers working in partnership” (Cousins & Earl, 1992, p. 399). Cousins and Earl describe the participatory evaluation process in a way that very much explains the technical support role for the MSIP evaluation consultant:

Essentially, practitioners “learn on the job” under the relatively close supervision of the expert evaluator, where both parties participate in the research process. Such learning is crucial to the participatory model as it is intended that key organization members develop sufficient technical knowledge and research skills to take on the coordinating role on continuing and new projects, and need to rely on the evaluator for consultation about tech-
nical issues and tasks, such as statistical analysis, instrument design, technical reporting, and the like. (Cousins & Earl, 1995, p. 8)

The Foundation chose to begin my contract prior to any schools being funded. The timing was important because schools were (and still are) required to complete a thorough proposal that includes the important attributes of their school context (including features that might be potential assets and barriers to change), an identification of students at-risk, school improvement goals, short-term objectives, a detailed implementation plan, an evaluation strategy, and a budget. Evaluation had to be built into the development and implementation of each school initiative from inception. Therefore, my services needed to be in place when the first call for proposals from schools was issued.

My first role as evaluation consultant was to assist schools that were interested in applying for funding in developing their evaluation plan. An evaluation plan was (and still remains) a necessary component of the funding application. (Figure 1 shows the basic requirements for submitting an application.) Teachers recognize that they need assistance with this aspect of their funding proposal, however they do not necessarily understand the value of the process.

The evaluation plans that are created from these early discussions rarely remain the same throughout the further development and implementation of the school’s initiative. The evaluation plans, in reality, evolve over time, changing as schools realize they need to make deeper and more significant changes to the practices of teach-

![Figure 1](Image)

**Basic Requirements for Submitting an Application for Funding 1991**

The school improvement initiative must:

- be school-based and teacher initiated;
- focus on the needs of adolescent secondary students (grades 7 to senior 4);
- address fundamental issues of educational improvement and student learning for at-risk students;
- have the potential for long-term impact on the school;
- have strong potential for replication or adaptation by other schools;
- be designed or developed to incorporate a collaborative and participatory approach within the school;
- include an appropriate evaluation component.
ing and learning. However, having evaluation as an integral component of the proposal did emphasize in people’s minds the seriousness with which the Foundation viewed evaluation.

The discussions, however, did not always remain focused on evaluation. Many times, the process of developing the evaluation plan and articulating anticipated outcomes caused a re-assessment of the school’s goals. Goals were often too broad, vague, or unfocused, making them virtually impossible to evaluate. While practising evaluators would not be surprised that the evaluation discussion cycles back to such fundamental questions, for schools this was often an exercise in frustration. The positive impact, however, was that schools had to think clearly up-front about what they wanted to accomplish, rather than two or three years into implementation.

If schools were successful in their funding application, then they would receive both consultative and technical assistance from me. Schools were required to submit annual reports that represented a discussion of their own progress, struggles, and accomplishments. The expectation for self-monitoring and self-evaluation was built in. In the early years, I worked extensively with school teams as an external resource, in the domains of both implementation (planning and problem-solving) and evaluation.

In 1992-93, Brad Cousins and I conducted a research project that documented four schools’ participation and experience in evaluation (Lee & Cousins, 1995). Key people from the school teams themselves identified the importance of evaluation in focusing goals and objectives:

> It makes me look at the goals and objectives with the respect to my program and makes me take a serious look to make sure I do reach them and how I reach them, the process of how I got there, and what I will do in future. (p. 76)

We also documented the excitement of teachers finding out “what our truth is here,” a concept which harkened back to Sarason’s issue of context:

> I think the value of doing the research is struggling with the data and trying to figure out what it does mean. I see that as a positive force. . . . There is a tendency to disregard research done in other situations. [We think]
that may be true somewhere else, but it is not true here.
(p. 81)

This was reinforced again and again by MSIP schools. In the words of another teacher involved with MSIP:

TAKE NOTE: hard data from their own school populations can prod teachers like nothing else. Teachers will look with a jaundiced eye at anything airy-fairy that senior administration proposes, but they find it hard to ignore the voices of their own students and peers. Surveys, well constructed and accurately interpreted, can be a goldmine. In our case, epiphany was at hand ... the results of a second student and staff survey were shared. The data indicated that the VERY good results from the first survey were not an aberration ... but a reflection of the good things going on at [our school] every day. This was highly motivating to all staff members, but the significant discrepancies [with one particular part of the student population] could not be ignored. MESSAGE: the hard data was preparing the staff for the paradigm shift to come. We strongly advise you to have real, close to home facts to support your desire to implement change. (Glenlawn Collegiate Staff, 1996)

The teachers also spoke of the importance of an “external resource” for technical aspects (such as data analysis), coupled, in some schools, with “emotional support and guidance.” In analyzing our findings, we were concerned about the dependency on the external consultant and raised questions about the type of skill set an evaluation consultant of this nature requires.

The more recent work of MacBeath suggests that the evaluation consultant was working with the schools as a “critical friend.” MacBeath (1998) describes a critical friend as someone who provides “a successful marrying of unconditional support and unconditional critique.” The critical friend requires a particular skill set that, as MacBeath describes it, includes:

- skills in dealing with data, explaining yet demystifying, yet rigorous in attention to valid inference. On the other hand, it called for interpersonal and group work skills, many of which could be recognized as the province of “counselling.” These included, for example, accurate lis-
tening, reflecting back, reformulating, accepting, working within the client’s frame of reference, challenging and confronting, at times soothing and smoothing. (p. 118)

The role of critical friend was (and to a great extent continues to be) a time-consuming one. Could this role be sustained as MSIP came to include more and more schools?

In the third year, the number of funded schools continued to increase. As evaluation consultant, I continued in the role of supporting individual school teams in their evaluation endeavours. However, there was a point where the time for my role strictly as evaluation consultant to schools was diluted. Also, in the third year of funding, the program coordinator position was reduced from full time to half time when a new person assumed the role. Schools were accustomed to having more access to the coordinator and so often called me with questions or for problem-solving and other types of support. Fortunately, after one year of this situation, there was another change of coordinator with the position reverting to full time.

The Next Phase — Finding New Ways to Build Skills and School Capacity

Despite the fact the coordinator was back to a full-time position, there was clearly a need to find alternate and more efficient ways to support schools. Part of this came from the coordinator and myself simply listening to the schools’ needs, the other part came from a commitment by the Foundation for an overarching evaluation of progress and learnings to date. Therefore, in year four, a team of Michael Fullan, Ann Kilcher, and I were charged with conducting an interim evaluation of the Foundation’s Manitoba program based on the experiences of the 13 “oldest” MSIP schools.

The report, “Lessons Learned from the Manitoba School Improvement Program,” reinforced the importance of inquiry and reflection as a key factor in the process of school improvement. We described the cluster of schools that had moved most broadly and deeply towards school improvement as follows:

Reflection and inquiry are integral parts of the change process in these schools. Staff collect information in a variety of ways (using surveys, interviews, focus groups, reflection meetings) and use data for decision making,
planning and problem solving. They have done research on their innovations and visited other schools. Evaluation is considered a shared responsibility. These schools engage in assessment and evaluation to learn about their accomplishments, to identify problems and priorities, and to verify their hunches. They take ownership for their progress and results. They regularly assess accomplishments and refocus. “The assessment helped [our students] be aware of what was going on. It certainly helped with clarity of thought.” (Fullan, Kilcher, & Lee, 1995, p. 27)

What else did we learn? In these schools, internal accountability takes precedence over external accountability. Schools that appear most successful in their endeavours understand and embrace the evaluation process. Engaging in ongoing inquiry and reflection appears to be one of the key factors separating schools with deep impact from those whose project impact is less significant.

Figure 2
Framework for School Improvement

Five Point Version (1995)*

• Focus on Student Learning
• Build Coherence and Shared Goals
• Broaden Leadership and Get Others Involved
• Connect to the World Outside the School
• Keep Track of How You're Doing


Revised Version (1997)**

FOCUS … On student learning, curriculum and instruction

REACH OUT …

• Mobilize the involvement of teachers, students, parents, and community
• Connect to the world outside the school
• Broaden leadership to create multiple layers of leadership

LOOK IN …

• Engage in ongoing inquiry and reflection
• Create coherence and integration among school goals and initiatives
• Increase the school's internal capacity for change

**Adapted from the original 10-point framework with the assistance of the school improvement team at Churchill High School, Winnipeg. A more detailed version is available.
The “school improvement framework” that arose from this study was widely distributed, both in its original 10-point form and in its shortened, integrated 5-point version (Figure 2). A spring conference in 1995 had as its theme “lessons learned” to date by MSIP. We were attempting more and more to model use of evaluation findings for MSIP’s own development, particularly as, with the evolution of MSIP and the growing number of schools, the coordinator and I were required to look for new ways to support schools. We increased our focus on networking and on responding to schools’ requests for professional development. Through newsletters, workshops, and personal contacts, we encouraged schools to share their experiences and learn from each other. One example of networking in action was when staff from two middle schools in different school districts took the initiative to provide complementary in-services to one another. One school had been working on portfolio assessment and the other on integrated, project-based curriculum. They learned from each other, thus enriching each school’s improvement efforts.

In year five, we offered a series of program evaluation workshops to which schools were encouraged to send teams of teachers. The four workshop days were spread over the course of the school year. The mornings were focused on taking the participants through the stages of evaluation (workshop titles were Introduction to Program Evaluation, Methods and Data Collection, Data Organization, Analysis and Interpretation, Reflection and Reporting), while the afternoons were used either for skill training in specific methodologies (e.g., focus-group facilitation) or to address issues of common interest. It is important to note that these workshops also help to reinforce the importance of systematically collecting data over time. Schools are encouraged to use mixed methods that produce both quantitative and qualitative data appropriate to the assessment of their own initiatives.

After the final session, responses were received from 25 participants regarding the evaluation workshops. (Thirteen had attended all sessions and 12 had attended one or a combination of the sessions.) All indicated satisfaction with the organization, content, activities, materials, and presentation style of the workshops. However, a number of the comments focused on the fact that the workshops should have been done sooner: “do them at the beginning instead of after the fact,” “evaluation workshops should come earlier in the project.”
Interestingly, when we advertised a repeat of the sessions to “new” schools another year, we had few people express interest. While the older schools had, in hindsight, expressed the opinion that they should have had the workshops earlier in their improvement process, when evaluation workshops were offered at an earlier stage, new schools had yet to see the need for them. The individual work with schools, coupled with the expectations for accountability still had to be in place.

Recent History — Focusing Capacity Building through Teacher Empowerment

In the last three years, MSIP has focused more and more on the notions of building internal capacity in schools. This was one of the points of the school improvement framework and has become a key goal for MSIP. Evaluation remains one area we believe is key to building schools’ capacity to be self-sustaining, continuously improving organizations. In the area of evaluation, we have encouraged schools to be the spokespersons and advocates for our evaluation approach. Very deliberately, the MSIP coordinator and myself have found opportunities for schools to present either on their school’s experiences (in which evaluation was a critical component) or specifically on evaluation. This has been a tool for having people in the schools reflect on the importance of evaluation. As teachers themselves, they also become more powerful — and sometimes more credible — spokespersons on behalf of evaluation.

For example, representatives from one school, when presenting to a provincial conference talked of how teaming up with the evaluation consultant was “a fortuitous event” and that this had been “key to the success of our project so far.” In describing the importance of evaluation to an external audience, the teachers reaffirmed their own commitment to continuing to use evaluation in the process of ongoing school improvement.

Teachers from two other schools presented at the 1996 Canadian Evaluation Society Conference at a roundtable on “Using Participatory Evaluation to Help Schools Manage Change.” A question teachers from both the schools faced was — Are you the school principal? — but none of the presenters was. They were teachers who had taken ownership for the evaluation process.
At the 1997 CES conference, a panel presented that included not only the MSIP coordinator, a school superintendent, and myself but also a teacher and students who had been involved in an authentic research project related to school improvement in their high school. (While not technically evaluation, this was one example of how MSIP has in recent years encouraged significant people in the school community — other than teachers — to become involved in the processes of inquiry and data collection. More on this in the next section.) Interestingly, as we have found platforms for people in our schools to present their experiences, their commitment to evaluation appears to increase.

In 1997, the Foundation commissioned an overall evaluation of MSIP, with Lorna Earl and myself as the principal researchers. The evaluation was a large and complex undertaking, utilizing multiple methods and data sources (Figure 3). (The evaluation report is available on the Web site of the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation: www.gordonfn.org).

In keeping with using evaluation to build capacity, we trained a team of teachers (most, but not all, of whom were from MSIP schools)

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**Figure 3**

**Sources and Methods for the Overall Evaluation of MSIP***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>• Questionnaires (grade 8, grade 10, grade 12)</td>
<td>3057 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Focus Groups with at-risk students</td>
<td>22 groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>• Survey (parents of grade 8 and grade 12 students)</td>
<td>588 parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>• Interviews</td>
<td>22 individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinators</td>
<td>• Interviews</td>
<td>21 individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>• Questionnaires (all teachers)</td>
<td>553 teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Focus Groups</td>
<td>24 groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendents</td>
<td>• Interviews</td>
<td>14 individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School records of achievement (senior years/senior high schools only)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary profiles and existing data in school annual eports</td>
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*Adapted from Earl & Lee (1998).
to undertake the on-site interviews and focus groups in the 22 schools included in the evaluation. The educators who were interviewed or who participated in focus groups reiterated again the importance of evaluation. What is particularly interesting to note in the following quotes (all from different schools) is that the people talk about their own commitment to and continuing use of the evaluation process. This commitment appears to be built over time from ongoing external expectations for accountability (MSIP), coupled with providing schools with the opportunities and the skills or capacity to be able to respond to these expectations. The following quotes are taken from the overall MSIP evaluation (Earl & Lee, 1998):

The requirements of yearly reports demanded that we reflect every year and continue planning and developing and building on what we do and then reflect about what have been our successes and what have been our challenges and how are we going to meet them next year. A lot of things that we might have lost [if we hadn’t evaluated our progress], because every year we’ve struggled with ironing out the bugs because we’re accountable. (p. 52)

The evaluations were very useful tools to keep us on track and honest. The accountability was there with an outside agency coming in and looking at it very objectively. You can get immersed in it. You think “oh, we’re doing all right and you can be sliding down the road when you should be going straight instead of the left turn …” We got mad at some of the letters that came back and said “Damn it, anyway.” But after taking time to reflect on it, then saying “are we really addressing this?” So, having an outside agency sort of helped us keep our vision and helped us keep refocused to keep perspective and ask hard questions — the ones that are challenging like “Are you really meeting the needs of these kids? Are you really doing what you say you are doing? What proof do you have?” Those are the things that are really helpful. (p. 52)

We’ve used [MSIP staff]. I’m a strong believer in data and research and looking at where we are going and having a look at whether or not it’s working. That is one of the things that we used for providing us with direc-
tion — looking at the data. Are students being more successful now than they were? and using the data to make decisions. (p. 54)

Findings of the overall evaluation confirm that MSIP has moved past participatory — where schools work with and rely on my technical expertise — to a situation where people on school improvement teams are not only taking responsibility for their own evaluation, but are also teaching others in their communities. One school, in particular, is an example of this phenomenon.

In the case of this particular school the following conditions were at work:

- the community wanted reassurance that the significant changes they were making to the school for the benefit of at-risk students were not going to impact negatively on the students who were already successful;
- MSIP required the school to build evaluation into their project, with an increased emphasis on evidence related to student learning;
- the school received both consultative and technical evaluation support, although evaluation consultant time was increased through a grant from the provincial government (although our evaluation data suggests that the amount of my time is not necessarily correlated to success at the school level);
- key members of the school team attended the evaluation workshops;
- key members of the school team used their evaluation data themselves to present to staff and students;
- the schools’ annual reports were (and are) filled with data from multiple sources and methods including student marks, graduation rates, credit acquisition, as well as results from staff and student surveys and focus groups;
- key teachers presented at the CES national conference; and
- the school participates in all networking and professional development opportunities, including releasing two teachers (not key members of their improvement team) to be trained as interviewers for the 1997 overall evaluation of MSIP.

At a meeting in rural Manitoba, the MSIP Coordinator and I encountered an unanticipated outcome arising from this school’s ex-
perience. A principal of a very small rural high school, not yet connected with MSIP, espoused the importance of his school collecting baseline data and tracking their progress. This is not something that would have been heard a few years ago at a meeting of principals in rural Manitoba. However, this particular principal had been working with and drawing on the expertise of a teacher in one of the district’s other schools — the MSIP school described above.

The Future — Moving Toward Student Empowerment

In discussions of empowerment evaluation, the issue is often raised that “few empowerment approaches actually empower the program clients to control or influence evaluation of the services they receive” (Rowe, 1997). MSIP has had some experience working with students as part of their school’s improvement team. In half a dozen schools, students have had some role as researchers or evaluators. We have found this to be a very powerful way of involving students in authentic learning activities (Bryant, Lee, & Levin, 1997). As well, it can create interesting shifts in the roles of students and teachers when students are the keepers of information to which staff does not yet have access or may not yet understand.

One of MSIP’s goals is to further assist in the development of student empowerment through evaluation processes. The “Students At The Centre” project, starting in three schools in September 1998, is a deliberate venture into the realm of empowerment evaluation, where the clients (students) rather than the service providers (teachers) will take primary ownership for evaluation processes and results. The students who will be involved in the project will not only be those with a history of achievement, but also those at risk of dropping out. It is MSIP’s intention to provide another vehicle for student learning, while at the same time experimenting with the next level of empowerment evaluation.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Over the years, through working with the schools as well as through overall evaluations of MSIP, we have learned some new things and found evidence to reinforce the findings of others. The learnings are divided to address the key questions raised in the introduction to this article: What have we learned about how to move schools into an empowerment model of evaluation? What are the benefits of em-
powerment evaluation to educational reform? What have we learned about how to move into an empowerment model of evaluation?

The Starting Point — Finding Your Own Truth

A large urban high school in Calgary may be very much the same in structure and culture as a large urban high school in Winnipeg, if the student and teacher demographics are similar. Young people in many Canadian high schools have common concerns about their educational environment and the relevance of what they are learning in school. However, to those who work and live in a particular high school, that high school is unique. Consequently, data from other schools are not compelling to teachers. We have found, therefore, that a starting point to engaging teachers in an evaluation process is helping them find their own truth. “Close to home facts” are an impetus not only for change, but also for building teachers’ commitment to ongoing inquiry and reflection.

Moving from Participatory to Empowerment Evaluation

MSIP began with the Foundation’s commitment to evaluation and with the evaluation consultant playing an intensive role in helping teachers see the value of evaluation processes and the data they produce. Through a consistent and collaborative relationship with schools over an extended period of time, it has been possible to move teachers from a dependence on the evaluation consultant (still within a participatory evaluation approach) to a relationship where the evaluation consultant is a resource and support for the school’s own ongoing inquiry and reflection. The relationship between schools and the evaluation consultant is consistent with the use of MSIP staff as critical friends, external professionals who support schools in their improvement struggles through the provision of unconditional support, combined with honest critique, probing questions, and specific technical skills. While the MSIP program coordinator plays this role in relation to planning, implementation, and problem-solving, the evaluation consultant must also be prepared to assume this role if she is to be an effective mentor, facilitator, and coach. However, the support of the evaluation consultant is not enough. It has been coupled with professional development opportunities, MSIP’s continued expectations for evaluation, and the production of annual reports, as well as opportunities for teachers to be the spokespersons on evaluation and school improvement. This combination of factors has created momentum for authentic teacher ownership of the evaluation process.
Empowerment Evaluation Is Hard Work — Not to Mention Labour Intensive!

One of our initial suspicions has certainly been confirmed many times. Evaluation of this nature is foreign to schools and embedding the process takes time, patience, and multiple opportunities for skill development. People in the schools must be prepared (both in attitude and in skill) to take ownership of the process. Their school administration must also be committed to the process, otherwise teachers will not receive the release time nor the resources needed to make the process work. In terms of the resources and supports required, access to technical support is necessary. Workshops are helpful, but they cannot replace the one-on-one coaching that builds skills and commitment. It is labour intensive for the teacher-learners and for their consultant-coach. The implication is, therefore, that empowerment evaluation approaches are not inexpensive if one considers the professional time that must be expended to make this type of evaluation genuinely work. What are the benefits of empowerment evaluation to educational reform?

Empowerment Evaluation and Internal Capacity Building Are Mutually Supportive

Educational reform is difficult, often frustrating, and highly demanding — with no guarantee of results. The school improvement approach, initially posited by the Foundation, assumed that evaluation could be a useful tool in the process. According to many schools, attention to evaluation has indeed supported their efforts. In recent years, MSIP has focused on a variety of ways, including evaluation, to build the school’s internal capacity for change. However, it appears that an empowerment approach to evaluation not only helps to build capacity, but when schools have the requisite skills to sustain their own improvement they become increasingly inquiry-minded. Capacity building and empowered evaluation become interactive and mutually supportive.

Internal and External Accountability Are Compatible

As we have seen, teachers can become the “owners and doers” of their own evaluation. However, it requires continual attention and, we suspect, some ongoing pressure for external accountability. We have also learned that schools that have taken hold of the role of evaluator — those who really own and use their school data — are
best able to tie internal accountability to external accountability. The concept is that if people in schools can see the relevance of collecting data in relation to their own goals and outcomes, they will begin to value and use the evaluation process. Those schools that have paid attention to collecting a range of data over time to support their own planning and to create their own evidence of success then have an array of information to support demands for external accountability. Credible information helps build community support for improvement efforts. Then schools are — and are perceived to be — accountable. This, in turn, enhances community understanding of and tolerance for the struggles and risk-taking that must inevitably accompany fundamental change.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Evaluation as a Tool for Change

MSIP will continue to emphasize the importance of evaluation within the school improvement process as a tool for change. An array of supports for schools will continue to include some form of technical and consultative support for evaluation — with the evaluation consultant as critical friend. Schools will continue to be expected to produce annual reports on their progress. In fact, there will be increased emphasis on providing appropriate and credible evidence in the domain of student learning.

As MSIP expands throughout rural and northern Manitoba, it will be difficult to continue to provide access to evaluation pressure and supports in a cost-effective manner. It will be a challenge to fulfill the role of critical friend and coach to schools spread over a large geographic area, some of which may be in remote northern communities.

Empowering Students to Influence Educational Reform

The other challenge is finding ways to involve students, as well as parents and community, more directly in both evaluation and school improvement processes. MSIP has had some experiences with students taking ownership and helping to direct limited research and evaluation projects. In conjunction with other activities designed to promote “student voice,” a new project will include a focus on students as evaluators — not only to build a set of important academic skills, but also to push the change process. There are few credible
vehicles for students to have appropriate influence on the shape of their own education although their voices, when well informed and articulate, are difficult to ignore. Our belief is that having students shape the questions that need to be asked in their schools and then collect, analyze, and present the results will provide students with a powerful voice with the potential to positively affect educational reform in Manitoba.

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NOTES

One of the learnings discussed in the overall evaluation of MSIP concerns “just-in-time delivery” of support to schools (Earl & Lee, 1998). Until schools see the need for a particular resource or support, it is not necessarily well used. This holds true for evaluation consultant time, which must be expended strategically. It is best used when schools see the need for support and call on it at a point in time when it is most helpful in moving the improvement agenda.

REFERENCES


