

PARTICIPATORY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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Abstract: Needs assessments are typically conducted exclusively by practitioners at the cost of quality or entirely by external evaluators at the cost of relevance. This article makes a case for participatory needs assessment, which we define as a systematic approach to setting organizational priorities in which trained evaluators and program stakeholders share responsibility for all substantive and procedural decisions. We outline potential advantages and three critical challenges: enlisting genuine participation by program staff, reducing time demands on stakeholders, and maintaining evaluation quality. We conducted a case study in which 81 stakeholders worked with an external evaluator to identify and prioritize needs in one school district. The district developed nine strategies for dealing with the challenges of participatory needs assessment. The result was a needs assessment that reached relatively high levels of utilization (support for discrete decisions, conceptual use, and process use) and moderately high levels of quality, particularly with regard to credibility with users. We argue that participatory needs assessment is an appropriate extension of participatory approaches to program evaluation.

Résumé: Les études de besoins sont typiquement effectuées soit exclusivement par des praticiens aux dépens de la qualité ou soit entièrement par des évaluateurs externes aux dépens de la pertinence. Cet article propose une approche participative pour l'étude des besoins, que nous définissons comme une approche systématique à l'établissement des priorités organisationnelles à laquelle des évaluateurs qualifiés et des intervenants des programmes se partagent la responsabilité de toutes les décisions importantes et procédurales. Nous présentons les avantages potentiels et trois défis déterminants : favoriser une participation véritable du personnel du programme, réduire les contraintes de temps imposées aux intervenants, et maintenir la qualité des évaluations. Nous avons réalisé une étude de cas où 81 intervenants ont travaillé avec un évaluateur externe pour repérer et prioriser les besoins dans un conseil scolaire. Ce dernier a élaboré neuf stratégies pour

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relever les défis que présente l'étude de besoins participative. Cet exercice a permis d'exécuter une évaluation des besoins qui a mené à des niveaux d'utilisation relativement élevés (soutien pour la prise de décisions individuelles, utilisation conceptuelle et utilisation des processus) et à des niveaux de qualité modérément élevés, en particulier en ce qui a trait à la crédibilité aux yeux des utilisateurs. Nous soutenons que l'étude de besoins participative constitue un prolongement adéquat des approches participatives à l'évaluation de programme.

Needs assessment is a key stage in the evaluation life cycle of programs and organizations. Needs assessments are typically conducted either by practitioners without the involvement of a trained evaluator or, in the contrasting case, external evaluators run the show while stakeholder participation is limited to providing data. In the needs assessment reported here, stakeholders were intensively and pervasively involved in all phases of evaluation decision making, in partnership with an external evaluator. This article¹ reviews the benefits and problems in stakeholder participation and demonstrates the outcomes of the participatory approach with data from a needs assessment conducted in an Ontario school district.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Needs Assessment

We follow Witkin and Altschuld (1995) in defining needs assessment as “a systematic set of procedures undertaken for the purpose of setting priorities” (p. 4). Although some evaluation theorists have recently returned to life-cycle models in which evaluation practices are partly a function of program stage (e.g., Chatterji, 2004; O'Sullivan, 2004), the salad days of needs assessment were from 1965 (when the American government required that needs assessments be included in most grants-in-aid proposals) to 1981 (when the requirement was withdrawn). In a review of 125 needs assessments conducted since then, Witkin (1994) found most were conducted by practitioners without support from professional evaluators, to the detriment of study quality. For example, less than 5% used a theoretically grounded method. Instead need assessments typically consisted of summaries of stakeholder preferences for available solutions, rather than a careful analysis of client needs. Witkin argued that these needs assessments confused means with ends. Witkin and Altschuld (1995) added that practitioner-driven needs assessments focus on the needs of service providers and organizers, rather than on client needs.

In contrast with practitioner-driven cases are rigorous needs assessment models such as gap analysis, in which stakeholders identify current and desired status on important values or program outcomes. In these applications (illustrated in Witkin & Altschuld, 1995), external consultants typically control data collection and analysis, resulting in a more precise estimation of needs. However, lack of decisional participation by stakeholders can lead to nonuse of evaluation findings through failure of the evaluators to consider the context in which needs will be addressed. In addition, external evaluators may ignore stakeholders' criteria in setting priorities. For example, the key term for setting priorities in the dominant needs assessment model — the size of discrepancy between attained and ideal values (Kaufman, 1972) — was ranked by stakeholders as eighth of nine factors to be considered in priority setting, in Foster and Southard (1988).

Participatory Evaluation

Participatory evaluation is “applied social research that involves trained evaluation personnel (or research specialists) and practice-based decision makers working in partnership” (Cousins & Earl, 1995a, p. 8). The key elements of the approach are user involvement and shared control of all evaluation functions, including technical tasks generally considered to be the exclusive domain of the professional. Cousins and Earl referred to the involvement of a small group of practitioner decision makers, but other proponents of the model (e.g., Chen, 2002) include broader groups of stakeholders, an elaboration we accept in this article. The reported benefits of participatory evaluation include clarification of program objectives, support for specific decisions, increased stakeholder belief in the credibility of the evaluation, greater understanding of program concepts, evaluation ownership, respect for the diversity of stakeholder perspectives, and organizational learning, particularly about evaluation processes (Cousins, 1996; Garaway, 1995; Johnson, Willeke, & Steiner, 1998; Preskill, Zukerman, & Matthews, 2003; Turnbull, 1999).

Although evidence has accumulated of the positive effects of participatory approaches, problems abound. For example, there is confusion over what constitutes a valid instance, despite recent attempts (e.g., King, 1995) to distinguish types of participatory evaluation. Even cases that violate the core attribute of the definition (i.e., that evaluation decisions be shared) have been reported as instances of participatory evaluation. For example, in two of the three cases cited by King, decision making was dominated by professional evaluators, and, in

others reported by Deacon and Piercy (2000) and Shula and Wilson (1995), practitioner input to methodological decisions was minimal. Other concerns about participatory evaluation revolve around three challenges: enlisting genuine participation, the time-consuming nature of participation, and maintenance of evaluation quality.

First is the challenge of enlisting participation by program staff. Existing power relationships in an organization, particularly when there is a history of passivity in decision making on the part of program staff, can frustrate evaluator attempts to create equitable partnerships (Shulha & Wilson, 1995). Evidence of stakeholders deferring to evaluation experts have been reported (e.g., Preskill et al., 2003; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1997). Similarly, groups with a history of passivity may not participate in the evaluation, leaving the field to dominant groups within the organization (Greene, 2000). The same effect arises when a powerful stakeholder group excludes others (Lackey, Moberg, & Balistreri, 1997). The initial formulation of participatory evaluation called for involvement of a small working group of program staff (Cousins & Earl, 1995a), a strategy that appears to neglect the critical role of senior decision makers (Smith, 1999). But in reviewing reported cases of participatory evaluation, Huberman (1995) argued that the involvement of central office staff casts a shadow on the trustworthiness of the data. Even if a representative group of stakeholders comes to the table, the mechanisms for enabling genuine participation are murky. For example, Johnson et al. (1998) found little research on how to involve stakeholders in the design of data-collection instruments. Strategies for engaging stakeholders in quantitative analysis are especially perplexing. Given that the needed technical expertise usually resides only in the repertoires of professionals, quantitative evaluations may be much more susceptible to unequal partnerships.

The second substantial challenge, compounding the first, is that evaluations are time consuming, even for professionals who do not have to acquire a new skill set in order to perform routine evaluation tasks. Practitioners can be frustrated and surprised by the time commitments required (Cousins & Earl, 1995b). The longer the duration of the evaluation, the more likely that volunteers will leak from the team (Gaventa, Creed, & Morrissey, 1998). Attrition may not be random; over time the team may become unrepresentative of program stakeholders as those with less control of their schedules fall away. Task frustration might also increase dependence on evaluation professionals to get the job done.

The third challenge is quality. Giving untrained program personnel an equal voice in design decisions may jeopardize the credibility of the evaluation. Brisolara (1998) argued that participatory evaluation is unconcerned about quality issues and violates objectivity requirements. Cousins and Earl (1995b) bemoaned the failure of participatory evaluations to take advantage of contextual information that is accessible in stakeholder partnerships. The central dilemma is the conflict between ownership and expertise or, in Patton's (1997) terms, "conflicting goals of improving versus proving" (p. 161). The key strategy for bridging the dilemma is to train stakeholders in the skills required for full participation. The trainers, typically external experts, should emphasize individual and collective learning — the goal is to build capacity that stays within the organization after the completion of the specific evaluation and the departure of the individuals who conducted it (Quintanilla & Packard, 2002). Evaluation capacity is represented as an outcome of participatory evaluation but it is also prerequisite to it.

In the case study reported here we describe strategies for overcoming these three challenges in the context of a participatory needs assessment, which we define as a systematic approach to setting organizational priorities in which trained evaluators and program stakeholders share responsibility for all procedural decisions.

METHOD

Participatory Needs Assessment

The needs assessment was a four-stage process, displayed in Table 1, to set priorities in an Ontario school district. Stage 1 was a pre-assessment that consisted of scope setting and stakeholder identification. Stage 2, the focus of this paper, consisted of data collection to identify district priorities. Stage 3 consisted of the implementation of the findings from the needs assessment. Stage 4 consisted of on-going monitoring of the implementation. Stages 1-3 were completed September 2003 to January 2004 and Stage 4 is continuing.

In Stage 1, district administrators defined 14 stakeholder groups.² Within each group, senior staff identified stakeholders who were knowledgeable about educational issues, had credibility with other members of their stakeholder group, and were willing to participate. These 81 individuals were assigned to the four stages so that approximately one third of the membership of each stage carried on to the

next stage (as shown in Table 1). A small team (the CEO and three staff members) supported the activities at each stage and provided continuity. The first author, a university-based researcher/evaluator, participated intensively in Stage 2 and intermittently in the other stages.

Sources of data for the needs assessment consisted of surveys to all stakeholder groups (13,042 were returned) and 108 individual and 52 focus group interviews.

Evaluation of the Needs Assessment

We conducted an explanatory case study (Yin, 2003). Sources for the evaluation of the participatory needs assessment consisted of:

1. Written reports prepared by 14 practitioner research teams on the results of their interviews. In most instances teams appended summaries of their raw data (e.g., notes on interviews);
2. Oral summaries of the practitioner research team presentation to their peers. These presentations were audio recorded, and we used the tapes to supplement our field notes;

Table 1
Stages in Needs Assessment

Stages in Needs Assessment	Main Activities	Participants
Stage 1: Pre-assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • review of national and regional trends • review of research on impact of social trends on school outcomes • identification of stakeholders 	34 stakeholders; 12 moved on
Stage 2: Data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • design of instruments • administration of surveys • individual and focus group interviews • data analysis • reporting 	56 stakeholders; 15 moved on
Stage 3: Implementation of needs assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establishment of district priorities by trustees • representation of priorities in district slogan, goals and areas of emphases • development of new programs 	28 stakeholders; 12 moved on
Stage 4: Monitoring effects of needs assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • review of external and internal test results 	14 stakeholders

3. The final report of the joint evaluator-practitioner team containing the qualitative and quantitative analysis (Ross, Ben Jaafar, & Hogaboam-Gray, 2004);
4. Participant observer field notes from two training sessions. Our notes consisted of trainer plans, the extent to which the plans were implemented, practitioner responses to the training (especially the questions they posed in the sessions), and observations of group activities as they applied the training to their data-collection tasks;
5. Field notes of central administrative team meetings. We made notes during these meetings and elaborated on them with interpretive detail immediately after;
6. Field notes of evaluator interactions with practitioners in individual coaching sessions. We compiled narrative summaries with interpretive notes immediately after each contact;
7. Field notes on presentations of study results to district trustees;
8. Field notes on use of needs assessment data in Stages 3 and 4.

Data analysis consisted of pattern matching (Mark, Henry, & Julnes, 2000); that is, we searched the database for instances of the three challenges, hypothesized how these challenges might affect evaluation outcomes, and tested these hypotheses against recorded events.

IMPLEMENTATION OF PARTICIPATORY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

We used the three challenges described above to organize information about the participatory needs assessment. Table 2 summarizes the overt and tacit strategies used by the district to address each challenge.

Table 2
Strategies for Meeting Challenges of Participatory Evaluation

Challenges	Strategies
1. Enlisting genuine participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • involve all stakeholder groups • sliding scale of responsibility
2. Participation is time consuming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • train stakeholders in evaluation processes • recruit multiple members of each group • division of labour
3. Maintaining evaluation quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide focused training • triangulate methods • use common tools • monitor performance and provide remedial support

Challenge 1: Enlisting Genuine Participation

Stakeholders participated in all phases of the evaluation as full partners with the external evaluator. There were three strategies for ensuring genuine participation: (a) constant involvement of all stakeholder groups with differential participation by individuals, (b) a sliding balance of responsibility between stakeholders and the external evaluator, (c) training and coaching of stakeholders.

The first strategy of involving all stakeholder groups in all evaluation decisions was met with the caveat that K-6 students had no role in the evaluation and at-risk youth (students who had left school or were likely to) participated only as data providers and only then in individual interviews. All other stakeholder groups participated with the external evaluator in defining the scope, determining overall design, sampling, creating instruments, providing data, collecting data, analyzing data, and making recommendations. Individuals participated in sets of decisions that embraced one or, at most, two stages.

Although there was continuity for stakeholder groups through inclusion in each phase of the evaluation, there was no overt procedure for communication within stakeholder groups. Field notes from central meetings indicate that individuals were told they were participating as knowledgeable individuals, not as spokespersons for a particular constituency. In response to questions we posed at the oral presentations, some groups reported there was communication among their membership. For example, teacher union members said they handed off the portfolio to their successors with an update on procedures and outcomes in the previous stage. But most individuals stated they received information only from the central team (CEO and three staff). The central team guided the socialization of new members and became the repository for collective memory. This control was tempered by the retention of one third of the membership of each stage into the next and by distributing all reports from previous stages to new members.

The second strategy consisted of responsibility for each task sliding across a scale anchored at one pole by dominance by the external evaluator and at the other pole by dominance by stakeholders. In Stage 1, stakeholders reached consensus on the purposes of the needs assessment, decided that they wanted to use a combination of surveys and interviews, and identified specific survey items and interview questions to be included in the instruments (field notes

from final Stage 1 session). The external evaluator responded to each of their decisions with operational plans that were reviewed and negotiated only with the central administration team, not with any of the stakeholder groups. The external evaluator formalized the survey by combining stakeholders' conception of the goals of school (preparing students for various pathways) with stakeholders' criteria for setting priorities (how well the district is preparing students and how important it is to improve district performance on each preparation category). The external evaluator's role was partly technical (e.g., formulating specific questions and formatting the text for optical scanning) and partly conceptual (e.g., reviewing the conception of school goals against those provided by standard curriculum texts, such as Wiles & Bondi [2002], and the conception of priority setting against needs assessment models such as Kaufman's [1972] discrepancy model). When formatting the interview guide, the external evaluator tightened the connection between survey items and interview prompts.

The central team accepted the external evaluator's advice for the format and content of the survey and interview guide but opted for a population sample for the survey rather than the stratified random sample he recommended (central team field notes). In this phase of the partnership, the external evaluator interacted with only one stakeholder group (essentially the CEO and staff), even though the decisions had initially been made by a multiple stakeholder panel.

In Stage 2, stakeholders took responsibility for the collection and analysis of qualitative data using procedures and templates recommended by the external evaluator. Stakeholders were purposefully assigned to four-person research teams that were given the task of investigating the perspectives of one stakeholder group. Each team consisted of one or two members of the target stakeholder group and representatives of two or three other groups. Field notes from the second training session (described below) indicate that team members typically interviewed in pairs; one person asked the questions and the other recorded answers on the interview guide. Teams used a series of templates designed by the external evaluator to summarize and interpret their data. Teams communicated their findings in written summaries and in oral reports that were presented to other teams. The external evaluator's role was to provide training (see below) and conduct a cross-case analysis (undertaken by the second author and reported in Ross et al., 2004).

Stakeholders were much less involved on the quantitative side. The central team distributed the surveys to nine of the fourteen stakeholder groups; the remaining groups were contacted by their respective research teams. There was minimal stakeholder involvement in the quantitative analysis. The external evaluator (and a doctoral student) determined the reliability of the categories in which the items were clustered, devised a formula for defining needs, rank ordered the needs for each stakeholder group, compiled descriptive statistics, and compared the means between groups. Stakeholder participation was limited to the central team reviewing data analysis plans and interpreting survey results as reported in interim and final reports. One week before the presentation of the team reports, the external evaluator distributed to the research teams tables that summarized the survey results for each stakeholder group. Analysis of the team reports showed that none of the teams included the quantitative data in their report, even though the fourth step of the data-analysis procedure called for it.

The third strategy for eliciting genuine participation in the evaluation was to provide stakeholders with the knowledge and skill needed to make informed choices. Although providing the central team with information about options and criteria for making decisions at critical junctures was important, most of the external's efforts went into training the research teams. There were four opportunities to do so:

1. The external evaluator held a two-hour evening workshop with the 14 teams that focused on the specific data collection activities they were being asked to perform. An excerpt from Arksey and Knight (1999) containing advice on interviewing was distributed prior to the session. Field notes from the session indicate that the external evaluator identified strengths and weaknesses of surveys and interviews, arguing that both were required for a balanced view. Participants reviewed the interview guide to ensure there was a common understanding. The external evaluator described the advantages of individual and focus group interviewing, arguing that both are better than either. After an outline of qualitative sampling strategies, each team devised strategies for recruiting interviewees. In the final activity, the external evaluator elicited from the whole group threats to the credibility of an interview study; each team then devised strategies for reducing these threats. Throughout the session, those with deeper prior knowledge supported team members with less

(the teams were designed so that each contained at least one member with formal evaluation training or experience).

2. Two weeks later, after most teams had conducted at least one interview, the external evaluator held another two-hour evening workshop with the 14 teams that focused on how to analyze the data they were collecting. Field notes from the session indicate that it began with a large-group discussion of successes and problems encountered in the initial interview. The external evaluator presented a five-step procedure for analyzing interview data (make a good record, summarize your data, develop themes, integrate different data sources, describe the implications of the analysis). The external evaluator described alternative ways of completing each step and modeled the procedure using excerpts from interviews from another study (Ross, Rolheiser, & Hogaboam-Gray, 2002). Each team analyzed an excerpt from the same database. The external evaluator applied the data analysis model to the task of the research teams and provided additional scaffolding in the form of templates for the five steps. The key template was for summarizing data: organizing information by interview prompt and clustering responses to show agreement and disagreement within the interview sample on positions taken by interviewees and their reasons for those positions. The session concluded with teams planning their next steps.
3. The external evaluator met, when invited to do so, with individuals and teams over the eight weeks in which teams collected and analyzed interview data. Field notes from these sessions indicate that initially the most frequently asked questions concerned sampling issues (how to identify members of indeterminate populations, how to persuade busy people to consent to an interview, how to tell when a sample is saturated), along with questions about specific interview techniques. Later in the process, questions shifted to data analysis. Some stakeholders reported that they were so overwhelmed by the sheer volume of data that they reduced the number of planned interviews to avoid getting more information. There were also questions about how to identify a theme. The external evaluator responded to requests for help with specific suggestions supported by examples using excerpts from the team's database. Much

of this coaching involved “healing well patients”: graduates of the external evaluator’s course on program evaluation (offered at an off-campus location in the district for many years) were particularly likely to seek help, bringing well-focused questions.

4. The research teams split into two groups for delivery of their reports (i.e., each presented to six other teams). Each oral report described the perspective of the stakeholder group interviewed by the team. Teams provided supportive written documentation consisting of a longer data report and/or copies of the completed templates used to analyze the data. The oral reports were 15 minutes long, followed by 15 minutes of discussion. Feedback from the external evaluator highlighted strengths of the methods used by the teams. Feedback from other teams focused on findings and in some instances noted differences in the methodology of the teams (field notes from presentation sessions).

Challenge 2: Participation is Time Consuming

The district applied three strategies for dealing with the time demands of participatory evaluation: selection of a large team of willing stakeholders, division of labour, and focused training.

The first strategy was to reduce demands on individuals by recruiting multiple members from each group. The central administrative team generated a large pool of stakeholders who had previously participated in school, district, or community activities. The pool was rank ordered within stakeholder groups in terms of knowledge of educational issues, credibility with other members of their stakeholder group, and willingness to participate. Recruitment was more successful with internal than external stakeholders (central meeting field notes). The chief impediments were the time required for the tasks and the expectation of some external stakeholders (based on prior experience) that their role would be to briefly review plans generated by staff rather than undertaking substantive work. Some withdrew when they realized that the time required between sessions was much greater than that required for the formal meetings (field notes: session 1, Stage 2). Although replacements from all groups were found, recruiters dug deeper in some stakeholder lists than others (central meeting field notes). Mathie and Greene (1997) suggested that unequal participation arising from participant attrition

makes it easier to find agreement on action. We suspect such actions, if generated by groups not representative of all stakeholders, will be hard to implement.

The second strategy of dividing the tasks of evaluation so that individuals participated in one or, at most, two stages, while all groups participated in virtually all tasks, made the time commitment manageable. However, the most demanding tasks (collection and analysis of interview data) involved far more time within the two-month period than participants anticipated (field notes from training sessions, individual coaching sessions, and oral presentations). These tasks could not be split further without great risk to the credibility of the process. In addition, individuals did not experience all needs-assessment phases, and as noted earlier, communication within stakeholder groups was not built into the design.

The third strategy was to offer focused training, that is, formal instruction and coaching on the specific tasks of the research teams, delivered at the time stakeholders were doing those tasks. There were obstacles: The audience for the training was very mixed, ranging from those with graduate courses in evaluation/research (including M.A. thesis writing) to those with much less formal education. The learner-instructor ratio for the formal sessions was 50:1. The sessions were well attended but some missed one or both due to other time commitments. In addition, most requests for coaching came from those with a stronger foundation in research (field notes from individual coaching sessions). The use of cooperative learning techniques and focusing on group products eased these problems. Nonetheless, the time demands were heavier for those with less evaluation skill, with the result that some pulled back from the tasks, jeopardizing the goal of equitable participation.

Challenge 3: Maintaining Quality

The key strategies for maintaining quality were to triangulate methods, use common instruments, and monitor performance.

The first strategy involved triangulation of data sources (surveys and interviews). Triangulation of data sources was facilitated by both data collections addressing the same themes (i.e., the district's preparation of students for alternate futures). Within both data sources, there was triangulation within and between the 14 stakeholder groups. However, after stakeholders had identified the survey's focus and most of

the items, the external evaluator took responsibility for quantitative data analysis and reporting. The result was that method triangulation was at a low level. Stakeholders tended to use the quantitative data solely for confirmation of qualitative findings (field notes from Stage 3). They tended to ignore important survey results that were not visible in the interviews. For example, stakeholder groups ranked district priorities in similar ways (i.e., stakeholder group membership explained only 2%–6% of the variance in the rankings) but the groups differed substantially in their overall level of support for action. Support for action diminished the closer the stakeholders were to the classroom. For example, support for improving the district's attention to personal development outcomes (emotional and character development, healthy lifestyles, etc.) was less than half as strong at the student level as it was at the senior administrator and community leadership levels (Ross et al., 2004).

The second strategy for maintaining quality was for the 14 research teams to use common tools. Although the teams had broad discretion on sampling decisions, all used the same interview guide, data-analysis templates, and certain procedures (such as interviewing in pairs, alternating between recorder and interviewer) (field notes from oral presentations and individual team reports). An unaddressed threat to the credibility of this procedure was the failure to collect information on the fidelity of implementation of the tools and on the reliability of the analysis.

The third strategy was for the external evaluator to monitor the performance of the research teams and provide remedial support. Although the workshops and individual coaching sessions provided some opportunity for the external evaluator to monitor and provide formative feedback, most of the evidence about the quality of research came from the oral and written reports. A few teams responded to the peer and external feedback at the oral sessions by revising their written reports. The cross-case analysis revealed variability in data collection, analysis, and reporting. Teams that had members with graduate training, even if it was obtained years ago, shone. The fundamental problem was that there were too many teams, too few had members with formal training in evaluation, and the two-month period of action was too short. These problems arose from strategies designed to reduce the time demands on stakeholders, that is, division of labour among a large worker pool.

META-EVALUATION OF THE CASE

Evidence of the effects of participatory evaluation is hard to come by and what evidence there is, is mixed. Cousins and Earl (1995b) noted in their review:

at the outset, we looked forward to an abundance of celebratory consequences emerging from our collection of studies. But, taken as a whole, though calls for celebration are certainly audible they are partially obscured by the noticeable rumbling of marginal impact. (p. 160)

The “conflicting goals of improving versus proving” (Patton, 1997, p. 161) suggest two kinds of meta-evaluative criteria that can be used to appraise the effectiveness of this case of exploratory needs assessment.

The first set of criteria speaks to the “proving” goal — the extent to which participatory needs assessment produced valid data. We considered criteria drawn from “shoestring” evaluations conducted when there are constraints in terms of time, budget or data (Bamberger, Rugh, Church, & Fort, 2004): (a) objectivity, (b) reliability, (c) credibility, (d) transferability, and (e) utilization (addressed in the second set of criteria).

- The participatory needs assessment did reasonably well on the criterion of objectivity. The biases of the external evaluator and the stakeholders were balanced by the engagement of other groups, so that no agent dominated the process, suggesting that the needs assessment represented the views of a full range of stakeholders. The only instance of a stakeholder group attempting to control another group’s input was observed in the oral presentations. The elementary teachers research team objected to a report by one of the student groups that they perceived to be highly critical of teachers. No other group joined the teachers’ critique.
- Against the claim of objectivity was the finding that the CEO built into the design mechanisms to control the pace and direction of the needs assessment. These included selection and socialization of all participants, control of communication from one stage to the next, and formal authority for approving or rejecting recommendations from the external evaluator. In

addition, only the CEO participated in all four stages. Field notes from the central team meetings suggested that the CEO was primarily motivated by feasibility concerns. Given the number of people involved, the short timeline, and the low budget (\$10,000), the CEO deemed it essential that the central team expedite decision making. Stage 2 field notes indicated that the CEO did not attempt to influence the data collection, except with regard to the use of a population sample. Stage 3 field notes indicated that the CEO accurately cited the text of the final report when drawing on the needs assessment for evidence for the content of the district action plan.

- The evaluation did less well on the criterion of reliability. No overt inter-rater reliability procedures were embedded in the data collection and analysis. On a positive note, there was considerable convergence across stakeholder groups, there was considerable agreement between quantitative and qualitative data sets, and the internal consistency of scales from the survey was demonstrated (Ross et al., 2004, found Cronbach's alpha scores in the .81–.91 range).
- The study, particularly the excerpts from stakeholder interviews included in the final report, had high credibility among users. Stage 3 field notes indicated that the main strength of the study was that each of the stakeholders regarded the study's representation of the values, beliefs, and concerns of its own group as accurate. However, the quantitative component of the data collection was processed selectively. Participants neglected the distinctive findings of the quantitative data, considering survey results only when they confirmed qualitative data.
- Finally, the transferability of the evaluation to future needs assessments in the same district was reasonably high, because evaluation logs documenting the procedures, instruments, and training materials were created.

The second set of criteria for assessing participatory needs assessment speaks to the “improving” goal, for example, the impact of the evaluation on support for discrete district decisions, generation and dissemination of knowledge about programs and organizational features affecting their delivery, and development of research skills at the individual and organizational learning levels (Cousins, 1995).

- In terms of discrete decision making, the CEO's annual report cited the participatory needs assessment as the basis for the revision of the district's vision statement, core values, and priorities for 2004–07. A major initiative to improve student performance in low achieving schools (each of 16 schools was given \$50,000 in additional resources) was a direct response to the needs assessment's finding that the district was not doing enough for underachievers. Field notes from Stage 3 indicated that, during the development of the district plan, participants cited data from the needs assessment to support arguments about future directions of the district, and the district's Areas of Emphasis for 2004–07 were congruent with the outcomes of the needs assessment. However, we had no access to the deliberations of senior administrators meeting in private sessions, so it is difficult to make definitive claims about the needs assessment's impact on discrete decisions.
- Conceptual use of the evaluation was visible in Stages 3 and 4. In particular, field notes recording presentations to district trustees indicated that the needs assessment crystallized concern about how the district was addressing the needs of students who were not college or university bound. This concern had been circulating in the district for some time around issues such as the failure rate on grade 9 mathematics and grade 10 literacy tests among students taking applied courses. What the needs assessment did was provide a context for raising these issues and provided data on how widespread the concern was among all stakeholder groups. This stimulated trustees and senior staff to explore ways of addressing at-risk students, at both the elementary and secondary levels.
- Process use (i.e., the extent to which the needs assessment contributed to research skills) was extensive at the individual level. Field notes from the coaching sessions and the oral presentations showed that individual participants frequently commented on how much they learned about research from conducting the needs assessment. Participants stated they felt confident to undertake similar tasks in the future, although they emphasized that their workloads would have to be offset to accommodate the time commitments required.
- In addition to increasing the capacity of individual members,

the research capacity of the district improved. Reusable procedures for surveying stakeholder groups were developed, and the needs assessment provided a demonstration of the district's commitment to a culture of inquiry. A member of the central team commented that previously priorities had been set by the CEO in consultation with trustees. In order to expand this process, the district had hired an external agency to conduct a strategic directions survey. The data collection failed. There was a poor response, the survey was perceived to be poorly designed, and respondents feared that there would be repercussions for responses that deviated from the party line. In contrast, the needs assessment elicited high levels of participation; the process was perceived to be inclusive and trustworthy. The district made a measurable step from using data as a surveillance activity to using it in the service of improvement (Earl & Katz, 2003).

CONCLUSION

The contribution of this study to evaluation theory is the demonstration that participatory evaluation can be productively applied to needs assessment. The case study demonstrates that the benefits attributed to a participatory approach are likely to be realized in needs-assessment applications. The greatest of these benefits is the enhancement of organizational processes. Previous attempts in this district to engage a diverse array of stakeholders in setting priorities through surveys failed when conducted exclusively by an external agency — district respondents did not trust the process and refused to participate. Participatory needs assessment elicited trust because the 81 stakeholders became advocates for the study. They sold the data collection to their peers through their personal credibility, skill in recruiting participants, and demonstrated commitment to the project. As observed previously (Patton, 1997; Sonnichsen, 2000), personalization contributes to utilization. King (1998) found that organizational trust was a predictor of success in participatory evaluation. Our data suggest a reciprocal relationship: organizational trust was both a contributor and a consequence of participatory needs assessment.

The case study also demonstrated that participatory needs assessment is threatened by the same factors that impinge on other forms of participatory evaluation. The practical contribution of this study is the identification of nine strategies developed by the district to address the concerns of enlisting genuine participation by program staff,

reducing time demands on stakeholders, and maintaining evaluation quality. These factors greatly mitigated the challenges associated with participatory evaluation. Participatory needs assessment enhanced the capacity of the district, bringing the district to a higher level of data literacy.

The practical implication of this study is that districts should overtly define their priorities at the outset of a joint endeavor. We raise three questions that need to be answered before undertaking a participatory needs assessment:

1. How important is the capacity building component?

While proponents of participatory evaluations have viewed capacity building as an incidental outcome of the process, we suggest that it be an intended consequence aimed at generating sustainable organizational improvements. Districts should view participatory needs assessment as one in a series of capacity-building opportunities. Subsequent initiatives should engage new stakeholder representatives working with those who participated in the first, so that expertise can be distributed across the district.

2. What is the decision-making protocol for key stages in the evaluation?

Leaders need to recognize that maintaining a high level of control may compromise the credibility and utility of participatory needs assessment. Moreover, it may discourage authentic participation if participants feel their input is trivialized. Districts need to develop status-equalizing strategies to reduce tensions between participatory decision making and hierarchical control of evaluation processes. An inclusive strategy that would mitigate structural and organizational constraints might be to create a representative committee of stakeholders to manage the process.

3. How will the process capitalize on expertise and include authentic participation?

On the one hand, practitioners value the expertise of external evaluators for completing tasks stakeholders viewed as specialized (e.g., quantitative analysis), because they do not see these as tasks they could complete on their own. The process would become more participatory if district staff developed the capacity to undertake such tasks

in partnership with external evaluators, rather than as clients. On the other hand, a sliding scale of influence through evaluation processes appropriately distributes authority over particular decisions on the basis of individual expertise — a strength of teams that are efficient and effective.

The tensions among time, resources, authority, expertise, and distributed decision making can interfere with participatory ideals. We suggest that the substantial benefits of participatory needs assessment will increase if districts take two actions: First, some of the “challenges” of the process should be embraced and considered opportunities to build the learning capacity of the organization. Second, leaders need to make the purposes of the process as explicit as the purposes of the evaluation.

An alternative mindset is required if participatory needs assessments are to evolve. It is a capacity-building, resource-consuming process. Deep learning changes how people think, and expecting that to happen with a small investment is short-sighted. Reflection on the case suggests several strategies for enhancing effectiveness that value the long-term benefits for the district.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the joint meeting of the American Evaluation Association and Canadian Evaluation Society, Toronto, October 2005.
2. The groups were: municipal, federal, and provincial politicians, parent and school council representatives, secondary school students, elementary students, senior administrators, elementary teachers, secondary teachers, district support staff, principals and vice-principals, occasional teachers, business, community and trade associations, service agencies, at-risk youth, and post-secondary institutions.

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