

## PROGRAM EVALUATION WITHOUT A CLIENT: THE CASE OF THE DISAPPEARING INTENDED USERS

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**Abstract:** Evaluators know they are supposed to identify and engage with stakeholders. What happens when the client has a very narrow concept of the meaning of evaluation? What happens when the primary stakeholders, including the client, disappear just as the evaluation gets started? First, it is important to acknowledge the challenge, then develop a strategy to negotiate the scope of the evaluation and to broaden the community of stakeholders. Divergent pathways are explored to facilitate use of the evaluation findings in such settings.

**Résumé :** Les évaluateurs savent pertinemment qu'ils sont censés identifier puis s'engager auprès des parties prenantes. Que se passe-t-il lorsque le client a une conception très limitée de la signification de l'évaluation? Qu'advient-il lorsque les principales parties prenantes, y compris le client, disparaissent au moment même où l'évaluation se met en marche? Il est d'abord important de faire face au défi, puis d'élaborer une stratégie visant à négocier la portée de l'évaluation et à élargir la communauté de parties prenantes. Diverses avenues sont explorées afin de faciliter l'utilisation des résultats de l'évaluation dans de tels milieux.

█ Evaluators have many sources for guidance in terms of the quality and integrity of their work. The American Evaluation Association (AEA) participated in the development of the Joint Committee's Standards for Educational Evaluation (Yarbrough, Shula, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011) and adopted the Guiding Principles for Evaluators (AEA, 2004). Likewise the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) developed Competencies for Canadian Evaluation Practice (2010). In all of these documents, the evaluator's relationship with stakeholders and the use of evaluations are important themes. Evaluators who attempt to shape their practice to align with these competencies, standards, and guidelines find many challenges along

the road. Evaluators' relationships with stakeholders can take many forms and are influenced by the demands of the particular evaluation at hand. Use of evaluations necessitates the identification of stakeholders and development of strategies for working with them. The purpose of this article is to explore challenges that arise in identifying and working with stakeholders in circumstances in which the stakeholders are not clear about what they need in an evaluation and in which there is a high turnover rate for the primary stakeholders in the project.

The following excerpts from the AEA's Guiding Principles and the Joint Committee Standards illustrate the need for evaluators to address the circumstance in which the stakeholders are not clear what they need from an evaluation:

- Evaluators should explore with the client the shortcomings and strengths of both the evaluation questions and the various approaches that might be used for answering those questions. (AEA, 2004, Systematic Inquiry section, para. 2)
- Evaluators have obligations that encompass the public interest and good. These obligations are especially important when evaluators are supported by publicly generated funds, but clear threats to the public good should never be ignored in any evaluation. Because the public interest and good are rarely the same as the interests of any particular group (including those of the client or funder), evaluators will usually have to go beyond analysis of particular stakeholder interests and consider the welfare of society as a whole. (AEA, 2004, Responsibilities for General and Public Welfare section, para. 5)
- *Negotiated Purposes*. Evaluation purposes should be identified and continually negotiated based on the needs of stakeholders. (Yarbrough et al., 2011, p. 29)

The second challenge relates to the problems that surface when there is a high turnover rate in the group of primary intended users. These excerpts from the Canadian Evaluation Society's Competencies and the Joint Committee's Standards relate to this challenge:

- Competencies 3.3–3.6: Identifies impacted stakeholders; Identifies the interests of all stakeholders; Serves the information needs of intended users; Attends to issues of evaluation use. (CES, 2010)

- *Utility Standards: Attention to Stakeholders.* Evaluations should devote attention to the full range of individuals and groups invested in the program and affected by its evaluation; *Explicit Values.* Evaluations should clarify and specify the individual and cultural values underpinning purposes, processes, and judgments; *Relevant Information.* Evaluation information should serve the identified and emergent needs of stakeholders; *Meaningful Processes and Products.* Evaluations should construct activities, descriptions, and judgments in ways that encourage participants to rediscover, reinterpret, or revise their understandings and behaviors; *Timely and Appropriate Communicating and Reporting.* Evaluations should attend to the continuing information needs of their multiple audiences. (Yarbrough et al., 2011, p. 3)

A critical question that needs to be addressed at the beginning of each evaluation is: Who are the stakeholders who need to be identified? Patton (2008) tells us that stakeholders include “people who can benefit from an evaluation” (p. 61). Of course, that is such a broad description that Patton suggests strategies to narrow the range of possible stakeholders by focusing on a group of primary intended users. These are specific people

who actively seek information to learn, make judgments, get better at what they do, and reduce decision uncertainties. They want to increase their ability to predict the outcomes of programmatic activity and thereby enhance their own discretion as decision makers, policymakers, consumers, program participants, funders or whatever roles they play. (Patton, 2008, pp. 66–67)

#### “THE GRANT REQUIRES A SUMMATIVE EVALUATION”

The types of challenges that arise in negotiating the terms of an evaluation and identifying the primary intended users are illustrated in a summative evaluation that I was asked to conduct for a university-based teacher training program. Obvious stakeholders in such an evaluation include the project director (the client), the administrative authorities at the university (dean and department chair), the faculty who taught in the program, and the funding agency. The first challenge arose when the project director contacted me and said that he needed a summative evaluation of a 7-year project and could I just

send him a survey that he could use. In my view as an evaluator, I felt that this request had important shortcomings that would not allow the evaluation to address the public good. Therefore, I adopted a role as negotiator and educator to broaden the planned approach.

The second challenge became evident when there was significant turnover in the obvious list of stakeholders, such that none of the people who were on the list at the beginning of the evaluation continued to hold those same positions by the end of the project. Patton (2008) describes turnover as “the Achilles’ heel” (p. 85) in evaluations that are designed to align with the directives presented at the beginning of this article.

Gallaudet University was awarded a grant by the U.S. Department of Education to plan and implement a teacher training program to prepare teachers for students who are deaf and have a disability. The project had two primary purposes that were supported by the following rationales:

1. To increase the diversity of the teacher pool by recruiting and supporting teachers of colour and teachers who were deaf or hard of hearing. The rationale for the desire to have the teaching force reflect characteristics similar to the students they would be teaching is that the existing teacher pool is mostly Caucasian and hearing, and the deaf and hard of hearing community has a higher percentage of people of colour than is found in the hearing community (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2008).
2. To prepare these teachers to teach students who were deaf or hard of hearing and who had a disability. The rationale for preparing more teachers for this population is that schools are seeing a higher percentage of students who are deaf or hard of hearing who have an additional disability. Teaching these students requires a different skill set than teaching deaf or hard of hearing students without disabilities.

I had an exploratory meeting with the project director in which he repeated that he only needed a survey from me to conduct the required summative evaluation. At that time, I expressed my concern that such an approach had many shortcomings in terms of the scope of information that could be obtained and the usefulness of the information. I suggested that we consider alternative approaches that would provide information that could be used to document the project ac-

complishments, as well as provide a basis for improving preparation of teachers for this type of student on a broader scale (i.e., allow us to address the public good in addition to the funding agency's requirements). I outlined the assumptions associated with the transformative paradigm and its implications for a mixed methods approach to evaluation (Mertens, 2009; Mertens & Wilson, 2012), to wit:

- **Axiological:** The guiding principles for ethical practice in evaluation concern the ability of the evaluation to address issues of human rights and social justice. This project focused on preparing deaf and hearing teachers from majority and minority racial and ethnic groups for students who are deaf and have an additional disability. The confluence of these variables associated with marginalized members of society heightened the need for addressing issues of human rights and social justice.
- **Ontological:** The nature of reality is such that different versions of reality are held by people in different societal positions. The evaluator has a responsibility to reveal the different versions of reality and to support stakeholders in their critical interrogation of those versions of reality in order to identify which have the greatest potential to further human rights and social justice.
- **Epistemological:** The evaluators need to identify the cultural norms and beliefs of relevance in the context and be respectfully responsive to those norms and beliefs.
- **Methodological:** The methodology associated with the transformative paradigm begins with critical dialogue (hermeneutical explorations) and is designed in a cyclical manner to be responsive to the information needs at particular points in the project, with specific attention to culturally appropriate methods.

Based on our discussions, the project director agreed that a transformative approach for the evaluation would be appropriate. At this point, I asked to review project documents: the Request for Proposal to which they had responded with their project proposal, their annual reports, and a list of program participants. When I finished reading these, I knew the type of team that I would need to conduct the evaluation.

In keeping with the transformative paradigm's assumptions (Mertens, 2009; Mertens & Wilson, 2012), I contacted three graduate stu-

dents who reflected important dimensions of diversity in the deaf and hard of hearing communities: two were culturally deaf, meaning they identified with the Deaf sign language community and used American Sign Language; one was hard of hearing, had a cochlear implant, and could sign, voice, and hear. The rationale for this choice is that it was reflective of the diversity within the deaf and hard of hearing communities on the important dimension of type of language used (spoken versus signed) and that it allowed for appropriate and competent language use for effective communication.

The team members read all the documents mentioned previously and met to develop an evaluation plan that was culturally appropriate with a goal of furthering social justice. The plan was framed by the project goals and objectives and included evaluation questions, data collection methods and sources, and timelines. The data collection approaches included document reviews, direct observations of and interviews with participants who attended a 3-day reflective seminar for program graduates, a web-based survey with participants who did not attend the seminar, and phone interviews with university faculty and staff at cooperating schools where the teacher candidates had done internships and student teaching.

### Things Start to Fall Apart

About a week later, the team felt confident that we had a good evaluation plan, so we contacted the project director. At this point, the case of the disappearing intended users surfaced. The project director had accepted a position in another part of the university and was no longer in the Department of Education. The chair of that department and the dean with responsibility for that department had both changed. The faculty member who is the primary expert in deafness and disabilities was told that the program was ending and she would not teach in that area the next semester.

Even novice evaluators know that contact with stakeholders, especially intended users (Patton, 2008), is needed to increase utilization of evaluation findings. Here we were faced with the disappearance (or repositioning) of the full cadre of those who had been in the position of leading, administering, and implementing the grant at the university. The project director was committed to work with us to complete the required evaluation; however, his priorities had understandably shifted to his new position. The new department chair and dean pledged to cooperate with evaluators, but this was not

their “baby.” Because the project was ending and the faculty expert in deafness and disability had been reassigned, the evaluation team got the distinct impression that this project’s evaluation was low on the priority list.

### What to Do?

The evaluation team met to discuss strategies given the figurative disappearance of the intended users. We were all agreed that we did not want to collect data and produce a report solely for the purpose of satisfying a funder’s requirements, as this would not allow us to stay true to our transformative assumptions about furthering human rights and social justice. Our discussions centred on how to collect and present the data in a way that would have potential for stimulating action within the teacher preparation community to address the needs for the teachers who enter the classrooms and the students whom they teach. We recognized that the need for qualified teachers for this population exists worldwide. Students who are deaf with additional disabilities would continue to be present in classrooms, even if this project ended. Hence, we broadened our perspectives in terms of intended users beyond the typical personnel in a project to encompass the wider communities that prepare new teachers for deaf and hard of hearing students who have a disability. We decided to focus on the strategies that contributed to the teachers’ success and the challenges for which they felt inadequately prepared. We wanted to bring to light the complexity of the issues teachers face, successful strategies, and heretofore unknown issues that require attention when serving this population. We designed the evaluation so that data were collected in such a way that faculty who prepare teachers for this population of students would be able to see the similarities and differences between the challenges and successes of this program and their own programs.

### Implementing the Evaluation

We conducted two days of observations during the reflective seminar. We analyzed our field notes at the end of each day, noting emerging areas of successful strategies and challenges that the new teachers described. We discovered that the challenges the new teachers faced were myriad, ranging from low expectations of administrators for them and their students, to marginalization in the schools where they worked, to dealing with diversity in their students in many forms, for example, coming from homes where the spoken language

was not English and/or coming to school with no language at all. Their students also used a mixture of different language and communication modes in their classrooms, including American Sign Language, Signed Exact English, and Cued Speech. Simultaneous use of these methods of communication is not possible and the program graduates were prepared to teach students who used American Sign Language, leaving them with the question: what to do with the others?

## FIRST STEPS TOWARD SOCIAL ACTION

The graduates revealed poignant stories of shock when they realized that their students were viewed as second-class citizens by administrators and fellow teachers. They also indicated their frustration at wanting to teach their students, but feeling inadequately prepared, especially when their students came from homes when the language was not English or the children's behaviour problems endangered themselves and others. For example, a graduate stated:

My students are under 5 years old and they come with zero language and their behavior is awful. They can't sit for even a minute. Kids come with temper tantrums and run out of the school building. I have to teach these kids language; I see them start to learn to behave and interact with others. My biggest challenge is seeing three kids run out of school at the same time. Which one do I run after? One kid got into the storm drain. I'm only one teacher and I have an assistant, but that means there is still one kid we can't chase after at the same time as the other two. (Graduate interview, May 2007)

The evaluation team took the words of the new teachers and used them as a basis for interviewing university faculty and staff from the cooperating schools. For example, the above quotation was presented to the faculty and school staff to obtain their reflections on how teachers can be prepared to handle this level of challenge. The respondents acknowledged that it is unrealistic to expect that teachers can be prepared for every challenge that they will face; however, they also indicated that additional support for new teachers could be an avenue to address this. One faculty member commented:

I would have liked to see a mentoring type relationship that would pair them with an experienced teacher

the first year and develop a mentorship—even if it was for first and second year of teaching. That would really help—especially for the first year of teaching. That would have been another piece that would have been really nice. The students need to be able to remain in contact with each other ... We should also teach them that it is their responsibility to mentor younger teachers. (Faculty, June 2007)

As a consequence of these interviews, the need for additional support for recent graduates was brought to the attention of the department. One faculty member agreed to start an online discussion board for new graduates of the M.A. in deafness and disabilities program. When other students found out about the discussion board, they expressed an interest in participating as well. Even though the program for deafness and disabilities ended, the discussion board continues to serve as a venue for new and experienced teachers and faculty to post their questions, concerns, and successes.

## REFLECTIONS

The project funding ended and with it, the M.A. program closed. One upside is that the new department chair and dean used the evaluation results to develop courses to provide instruction for how to teach this population for students in all their programs.

A lesson learned in this evaluation is the need to encourage the use of the evaluation findings in a broader context based on the rationale that students who are deaf and have additional disabilities continue to be a challenge for teacher preparation programs in the United States and Canada (and the rest of the world, as well). To this end, we made (and continue to make) presentations to professional associations that focus on the preparation of teachers. We presented the results as a reader's theatre piece at the Association for College Educators/Deaf and Hard of Hearing (Mertens, Holmes, & Harris, 2008). The members of this organization are the faculty at all 72 universities in the United States and Canada who prepare teachers for deaf students. We also presented at the International Congress on Education of the Deaf (Harris, Holmes, & Mertens, 2010) and the American Educational Research Association (Mertens, 2008). We structured the presentations to be interactive to encourage sharing ideas among the participants on how they address these challenges and what can be done. We have prepared a number of manuscripts

for publication that present the findings as challenges to action in the teacher preparation community. When I teach my research courses at the university, I use the results of the study to generate discussion among the M.A. and Ph.D. students to identify topics in need of additional research.

The lessons learned also include ways to negotiate with clients/intended users in order to strengthen the approach beyond a survey at the end of a project. This is in keeping with the AEA Guiding Principles (2004) because evaluators have a responsibility to negotiate the scope of the evaluation. Evaluators also have a responsibility to address the public good; transformative evaluators have a responsibility to pursue social justice and human rights. The combination of negotiating a broader scope in this case example and being explicit about the values that were underlying the broader scope allowed us to overcome the challenges we faced.

## FINAL THOUGHT

If the intended users/clients disappear, look at a broader community. If one door closes, consider the multitude of other doors. This allows me as an evaluator to work consistently with my philosophical beliefs, even when the conditions are not promising at first glance.

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