Evaluating community-based programs: challenges and lessons from the front-line

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Evaluating Community-Based Programs: Challenges & Lessons From the Front-Line

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Our Focus Today...

1. **Some context** - evaluation ‘orthodoxy’ & the work of the CCYP

2. **The challenges** in collaborating with a diversity of community based projects in a regional area

3. **Our response** to these challenges

4. **Emerging CCYP ‘tailored’ approach** for evaluating community-based programs

5. **Feedback** about evaluation processes/approach
Some brief context....

• About the CCYP:
  - **History**: established Feb 2004 - Southern Cross University, Lismore, NSW
  - **Aim**: to enhance the safety, wellbeing & participation of children & young people, particularly in regional & rural areas
  - **Team**: multidisciplinary backgrounds - education, sociology, law, child protection, health, psychology, behavioural science
  - **Key Functions**: Research, Education & Advocacy
  - **Approach**: strong emphasis on inter-disciplinary & cross-sectoral activities, collaboration, ‘community engagement’
At the same time...

- Recent increases in community-based child & family programs
- Funding from govt & philanthropic agencies
- Often distributed through non-govt agencies
- Required to evaluate program impact
- Challenge = how to best do this

- Core interest - what does the community organisation know or do differently as a result of working with us??
So...

- Opportunity to develop program planning & evaluation support service for community-based programs working with children, young people &/or families:
  - High demand from regional organisations - & few relevant support agencies available
  - Opportunity to deliver against the CCYP’s primary aim
    » enhancing the safety, wellbeing & participation of children & young people
  - Opportunity to deliver against CCYP’s 3 key functions
    » research, education & advocacy
  - Limited CCYP core funding
Early Evaluation Approaches

• Emphasised experimental methodologies characterised by:
  - Random assignment
  - Strictly-standardised & often theoretically-based interventions
  - Control groups
  - Objective, quantitative outcome-focused data
  - Externally-controlled process (McCall & Green, 2004)

• Proved of limited value for community-based programs addressing complex human needs or issues:
  - Standards were not always desirable, practical or even ethical (Chatterji, 2007; McCall & Green, 2004)
  - Similar programs achieved varied results & different programs achieved similar results (Clark, MacIntyre, & Cruickshank, 2007)
Acknowledging Stakeholder Needs...

• Collaborating organisations:

  - **Evaluating the effectiveness** of a given program or service over a given period of time
  - **Support with planning** the given program or service to be delivered, based on the current best practice literature
  - **Using the results to seek additional funding** for the program or service
  - Evaluation process that was **least intrusive on their time**

  - Research suggests **relational, contextual & trust factors are key** in determining how evaluation results are received & acted on by program staff (Taut & Alkin, 2003)
Acknowledging the Stakeholder Needs...

- **Funding bodies:**
  - Wanted **robust & credible results**
  - Wanted to know if $ well spent
  - Sometimes involved in evaluation planning, with **expectations about the questions to be answered, the types of methods to be used &/or how the results should be presented**

- **Program participants:**
  - To ensure **best possible service & outcomes** from the program
  - Data collection methods that **maximise the % willing & able to give their feedback**
  - Data collection methods which **least intruded on their time** for receiving services
Acknowledging the Stakeholder Needs of

- **The CCYP:**
  - To **provide more** than is implied in definitions e.g.:
    - *The systematic collection & analysis of information to make judgments, usually about the effectiveness, efficiency and/or appropriateness of an activity* (Australasian Evaluation Society, 2006)
  
  - To **initiate & develop dialogue** aimed at enhancing organisations’ motivation, resources, capacity & confidence to plan & continually evaluate their practices, regarding the:
    
    - relevance
    - reach
    - acceptability &
    - effectiveness

  of their services.
Challenges Encountered to Date (1)

**Diversity of collaborating organisations:**
- 35 projects involving 29 different organisations
- 79% NGOs but also 5 govt agencies & 1 for-profit
- 83% local/regional but also 5 state, national or international
- Various fields/disciplines - education, health, child welfare, family relationships/support, early childhood care etc.
- Total of 107 staff involved (0 to 13 per organisation, 1 to 37 per project)

**Challenges for the CCYP:**
- Varying levels of organisations’ existing relationship & initial engagement with CCYP
- Understanding the language, values, contexts, etc of the different sectors
  - sometimes as mediator between collaborating organisations
- Planning / evaluating programs across varying geographical areas
- Being inclusive of different staff perspectives, needs, etc
- Repetition due to staff turnover
Challenges Encountered to Date (2)

• Diversity Across the Nature of the Collaborations:
  - Timeframes: 1 month to over 5 years - Median = 8 months
  - Funding: from $0 to $187,472 - Median = $5,000
  - Support Types: 1 to 10 per project - Median = 4
    – from funding applications, needs assessments, eval planning, program planning, ethics approvals, program management, program delivery, data collection, data analysis, report writing
  - Support Levels: from very low to very high - 4 to 87 points per project - Median = 32
    – when rated 0-10 points for each support type (from basic advice through to mentoring organisation)

• Challenges for the CCYP:
  - Varying levels of support needed & possible
  - Varying levels of understanding & baseline eval practices
  - Practical difficulties with obtaining ethics approvals
  - Practical difficulties with collecting much external or qualitative data
  - Broad range of skills required to meet diversity of organisations’ needs
Challenges Encountered to Date (3)

• **Diversity Across the Project Contexts:**
  - **Settings:**
    – community services, high schools, community settings, early childhood services, primary schools or homes
  - **Location:** 51% based locally but 12 elsewhere in region & 5 in multiple sites
  - **Range:** 63% covered nearby regions but 12 covered broad regions
  - **Intended Beneficiaries:** 1 to 4 per project - Median = 3
    – children &/or young people, families, workers, services or general community members
  - **Intended Outcomes:** 1 to 13 per project - Median = 5
    – children &/or young people’s social-emotional development/wellbeing, physical development/wellbeing, cognitive development/academic achievement, participation, safety/welfare, relationships with non-family adults, life skills/independence, spirituality, citizenship or rights
    – parents’ knowledge, attitudes &/or skills; workers’ knowledge, attitudes &/or skills; service delivery &/or accessibility; reducing inequities; family relationships &/or functioning; social capital &/or inclusion; interagency collaboration; & community knowledge, attitudes &/or skills

• **Challenges for the CCYP:**
  - Capturing information across various settings &/or geographical area ranges
  - Assessing reach & impact across various target groups, often within one project
  - Assessing impact across diverse range of outcomes, often within one project
  - Collecting data about sensitive &/or distressing topics
Challenges Encountered to Date (4)

- **Diversity Across the Children & Young People Involved:**
  - **Age-Groups:** 34% targeted 0-5 year olds, 20% 6-18 year olds & various other age-group combinations from 0-25 years
  - **Numbers:** 40% targeted 1,000+ & 17% targeted 11-50 & various sizes in-between
  - **Approaches:** 40% targeted only particular sub-groups, 26% used only universal approaches & 34% used a mixture
  - **Sub-Groups Included:** many projects included high proportions of children, young people or families experiencing 1 or more vulnerability
    - living in rural/regional areas; with low SES; with parental conflict/violence, mental illness or drug/alcohol issues; being Aboriginal or from other CALD backgrounds; or living in out-of-home care

- **Challenges for the CCYP:**
  - Assessing impact across various age-groups, sometimes within one project
  - Collecting &/or analysing data at both sample & population levels
  - Collecting data from vulnerable groups traditionally less likely to engage in eval activities
Responding to this Diversity Across Projects

**Overall Challenge** = Producing rigorous & credible results whilst sufficiently flexible to serve the interests of all project stakeholders

- Acknowledging the needs of the various stakeholders, including the CCYP
- Developing a set of guiding principles which have informed this area of the CCYP’s work
- Acknowledging the fundamental importance of the relationship between the CCYP & the collaborating organisations
- Revisiting established & emerging evaluation models, theories & approaches
- Tailoring any support to each project’s needs, resources & limitations
Developing some Guiding Principles (1)

- Review of international evaluation standards & principles
  - Heavy emphasis on more methodological aspects:
  - Some highlighted broader aspects:
    - Openness & transparency, Risk assessment & minimisation, Appropriate design & conduct, Accessible reporting, Commitment to integrity of the evaluation, Realistic expectations, Equitable treatment of all groups; Follow appropriate standard ethical practices – UK Evaluation Society (2003)
  - Most emphasised only the evaluator’s roles, responsibilities & required competencies - we considered these essential but not going far enough...
• **Further (CCYP) key principles...**

  - **Capacity building** - seeking to improve organisations’ knowledge, skills, resources, systems &/or practices in relation to planning, monitoring &/or evaluating their activities
  
  - **Value adding** - seeking to understand, complement & enhance organisations’ current service delivery & performance monitoring
  
  - **Accessible** - whereby various levels & types of support were provided, including some free basic advisory supports
  
  - **Inclusiveness** - seeking to incorporate data & feedback from as many of each program’s key stakeholders as possible
  
  - **Participation** - seeking to incorporate feedback directly from children & young people whenever possible
  
  - **Evidence generating** - applying high quality evaluation methods that built on existing relevant literature
Revisiting Evaluation Models, Theories & Approaches

- **Empowerment Evaluation** best articulated the full breadth & intent of the CCYP principles:
  - An evaluation approach that aims to increase the probability of achieving program success by (1) **providing program stakeholders with tools** for assessing the planning, implementation & self-evaluation of their program & (2) **mainstreaming evaluation** as part of the planning & management of the program/organization.
  
  - Operates around **10 key principles**:
    - Improvement, Community ownership, Inclusion, Democratic participation, Social justice, Community knowledge, Evidence-based strategies, Capacity building, Organisational learning & Accountability
    
    - Explicit underlying belief that all individuals & organisations are capable of **creating knowledge about, & solutions to, their own experiences**, when provided with the necessary tools & conditions
    
    - Describes the role of the **evaluator as ‘coach’**
    
    - Acknowledges the **need for varied qualitative & quantitative methodologies** & evaluation techniques - different approaches, or parts of them, will be better suited to particular programs, organisations, participants or evaluation questions

  (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005)
• So what has this meant in terms of our projects....??
25 CCYP projects involved evaluation tools being developed, collected &/or analysed

- 92% required development of evaluation tools:
  - 0 to 8 types of tools developed per project - Median = 3
    - 60% needed followup impact or outcome assessment tools
    - 52% needed descriptive or baseline assessment tools
    - 52% needed client satisfaction tools
    - 40% needed an evaluation plan
    - 40% needed program management tools
    - Other types = reflective practice tools, needs assessment tools, databases for use by collaborating organisations & client followup tools

- Up to 45 tools developed per project - Median = 5
Projects’ required **various data collection methods:**

- 80% involved **multiple methods** (Range = 1-6, Median = 2)
  - 68% used **paper surveys**
  - 56% used collaborating organisations’ **own records**
  - 44% used **face-to-face surveys**
  - 44% used **focus groups**
  - Other methods = telephone surveys, observation & computer-based surveys

Projects required **various data types:**

- 48% used **mainly quantitative** data
- 28% involved **mainly qualitative** data
- 24% involved a fairly **even mix**
Tailoring the Evaluation Tools & Processes (3)

• Projects required **various data sources:**

  - 72% **from multiple sources** (Range = 1-4, Median = 2)
    
    - 72% from **collaborating organisations’ workers**
    - 56% from the **families** of children &/or young people
    - 56% from **other organisations’ workers**
    - 52% from **children &/or young people**

• Projects required **data collected by various groups:**

  - 60% **by only one group** (Range = 1-2, Median = 1)
    
    - 76% by the **CCYP**
    - 60% by **collaborating organisations**
    - 4% by **children &/or young people**
• Projects required **various methodological techniques:**

- 72% included “**post**” data
- 40% included “**pre**” data
- 52% included **triangulation** of data collected from different sources
- 44% included **multiple rounds** or followups
- 20% included **control or comparison** data

• Projects required **various levels of analysis:**

- 80% involved only **service user-level** analyses
- 4% involved only **community-level** analyses
- 16% involved **both levels** of analyses
Our Approach - Stage 1: Rapport Building & Contracting (1)

- CCYP staff meet &/or share program plans & other relevant documents with a potential client organisation in order to:

  - **Make explicit the CCYP’s starting presumptions** that the organisation:
    - has a primary focus on service delivery & seek to do their best for their clients
    - has an obligation & is keen to learn about ways to improve their services
    - is likely to be routinely collecting much evaluative information – by recording, reflecting on & revising their activities, with individual clients &/or overall
    - is less likely to be capturing this information in most consistent &/or efficient ways
    - can be supported to develop & implement more consistent & credible data collection & recording systems

  - **Gain an understanding of the client organisation** &/or program values, goals, priorities, previous experiences with evaluation & any existing data collection processes

  - **Negotiate funding & timeframes**, in relation to the type, nature & extent of support the CCYP can offer the client organisation & the inputs that will be required from them
Our Approach - Stage 1: Rapport Building & Contracting (2)

**Strengths**

- Clarifies understanding of the CCYP’s approach to program planning & evaluation.
- Establishes the client organisation’s previous experiences with & attitudes towards program planning & evaluation.
- Enhances both side’s understanding of their roles, responsibilities, rights & obligations in relation to the collaborative project.
- Enhances the CCYP’s ability to tailor support to best meet the client organisation’s priorities, values, needs & capacities.
- Provides a foundation for an open, trusting relationship between the CCYP & the client organisation.

**Challenges**

- Can be time-intensive for CCYP & client organisations.
- Can be somewhat confronting where there is substantial discord between the CCYP’s & the client organisation’s values.
- Requires an openness to being critiqued & continually learning from experiences.
- Requires a sensitivity to which boundaries cannot be pushed, which can & how far they can be pushed.
- Can result in the loss of some potential contracts.
• CCYP staff work collaboratively with the client organisation:
  - To **review any relevant resources, systems & practices** they have been using to plan, monitor &/or evaluate their programs
  - To **assess their needs**, current status & the best ways to strengthen their future planning, monitoring & evaluation
  - **Acknowledges the priority given to service delivery**, usually with a focus on individual-level outcomes
  - **Seeks to develop evaluation tools & processes** that enhance, rather than detract from, the practitioner-client relationship
CCYP Approach - Stage 2: Evaluation Planning & Initial Tool Development (2)

**Strengths**

- Optimises the likelihood that proposed planning &/or evaluation tools & processes will meet the client organisation’s needs in an acceptable way.
- Optimises the ownership or likelihood of consistently implementing any planning &/or evaluation tools & processes developed.
- Begins the process of supporting the client organisation to reflect on & identify strategies for improving their current planning, implementation &/or evaluation practices.

**Challenges**

- Can be time-intensive for CCYP & client organisations, especially for complex programs.
- Inevitably involves negotiating a compromise between the “ideal” evaluation & what can be achieved.
- Can limit the amount of data able to be collected.
- Requires tools & systems that can accommodate variations in service delivery.
CCYP Approach - Stage 3: Evaluation Implementation & Ongoing Tool Refinement

• CCYP staff:
  - Train & support the organisation’s staff to implement the developed client & program monitoring tools & processes
  - Make any necessary modifications - to enhance functionality or to address changing client or program needs

Strengths

• Continues the process of enhancing the client organisation’s program planning & evaluation capacity.

• Increases the likelihood of consistent client & service delivery information being captured for ALL clients – which can rarely be achieved with externally-collected data.

• Models the need to continually reflect on & identify strategies for improving program planning, implementation &/or evaluation practices.

• Reduces the need for full ethical reviews – as data are collected by & remain the property of the collaborating organisation, as part of their routine service monitoring processes.

• Reduces the costs of achieving a quality program evaluation – by limiting the amount of external data collection required.

Challenges

• Can be time-intensive for CCYP & client organisations, especially where initial capacity is low &/or there are changes in program staff – in order to limit the gaps &/or inaccuracies in the collected data.

• Can require skilful question development & the use of triangulation & other techniques to strengthen confidence in internally-collected, & often subjective, evaluation information.
CCYP Approach - Stage 4: Data Analysis & Reporting (1)

- Client organisation provides the CCYP with the collected client & service delivery data - in a de-identified format

- CCYP staff then work collaboratively with the client organisation
  - To clean, analyse & interpret these data - usually happens a number of times during the data collection phase - in order to ensure data are being collected consistently & to allow any necessary modifications to evaluation tools &/or processes
  - To prepare any required reports or other documents summarising the findings
CCYP Approach - Stage 4: Data Analysis & Reporting (2)

Strengths

• Continues the process of **enhancing the client organisation’s program planning & evaluation capacity.**

• Increases the likelihood of **consistent client & service delivery information being captured for all clients.**

• Models the need to **continually reflect on & identify strategies for improving** program planning, implementation &/or evaluation practices.

• Models the need to **interpret data critically & in relation to relevant contextual factors.**

• Optimises the client organisation’s ownership of & likelihood to **act on the evaluation findings.**

• Provides the client organisation with **ongoing access to up-to-date client & program information** for use in their planning, service review & or reporting.

Challenges

• Can be **time-intensive** for CCYP & client organisations, especially where large amounts of data have been collected.

• Where evaluation findings are **largely positive**, care is needed regarding the best way of **presenting any relevant limitations** – so as to enhance the likelihood of them being taken on board.

• Where evaluation findings are **less positive**, care is needed regarding the best way of **presenting the results & recommendations** – so as to enhance the likelihood of them positively influencing future practices.
Feedback on our Approach?

- May 2008 - phone interviews with 25 clients - quantitative and qualitative questions
- A mix of managers (60%) & front-line workers (40%)

**Clients’ Expectations** from the collaboration:
- 56% mentioned gaining knowledge
  » about their program’s effectiveness / strengths / weaknesses
- 40% mentioned methodological approaches
  » Being rigorous / critical / professional
  » Being collaborative / consultative
- 36% mentioned high quality / professional conduct
- 20% mentioned getting support with particular evaluation tasks
- 20% mentioned improving outcomes for children &/or young people
- 0% mentioned learning about evaluation methods or techniques
Clients’ Overall Satisfaction with what happened:

- 88% were very / extremely happy / felt their expectations were exceeded
- 12% were happy / felt their expectations were met / mostly met
- 12% raised some concerns
  » distance issues / unclear expectations e.g. of what would be required from organisation, of style of interim report
- 28% mentioned wanting to continue / expand their relationship with CCYP
Feedback (3)

• Aspects **MOST satisfied** with:
  - 60% mentioned the **approach / relationship** with CCYP staff
    » Being supportive / encouraging / consultative / inclusive
  - 40% mentioned the evaluation **methods**
    » Being rigorous / thorough / critical / high quality / practical
  - 36% mentioned the evaluation **results**
    » Being positive / informing practice &/or further funding applications
  - 32% mentioned the evaluation **reports &/or tools**
    » Being high quality / relevant to their project

• Aspects **LEAST satisfied** with:
  - 28% said “nothing”
  - 24% **wanted more involvement**
    » In evaluation planning / tool development / report preparation
  - 24% **wanted improved communication**
    » Mostly face-to-face - from those based at distance
  - 12% had concerns about each of the following
    » **Appropriateness** of some evaluation tools
    » Contents &/or complexity of some **evaluation reports**
    » Inflexibility / time-consuming nature of **SCU bureaucracy &/or Ethics Committee**
Feedback (4)

• Ratings of **CCYP professionalism** (1 - 10 scale):
  - Mean 8.8 for **professionalism of CCYP staff**
    » Range = 6½-10, Median = 9, 60% rated 9-10, 4% rated <7
  - Mean 8.8 for **overall quality of work**
    » Range = 6-10, Median = 9, 59% rated 9-10, 5% rated <7
  - Mean 8.6 for **meeting agreed deadlines**
    » Range = 6½-10, Median = 9, 48% rated 9-10, 4% rated <7
  - Mean 8.4 for **flexibility to changes in their needs**
    » Range = 4-10, Median = 8½, 48% rated 9-10, 5% rated <7
  - Mean 8.2 for **keeping them updated**
    » Range = 6-10, Median = 8, 35% rated 9-10, 9% rated <7
  - Mean 8.1 for **availability of CCYP staff**
    » Range = 4-10, Median = 8, 38% rated 9-10, 13% rated <7
  - Mean 8.0 for **understanding their needs**
    » Range = 4-10, Median = 8, 32% rated 9-10, 8% rated <7
  - Mean 8.4 **across 7 items**
    » Range = 6.6-9.9, Median = 8.3, 32% rated 9-10, 8% rated <7
• Ratings of **impact of CCYP collaboration** (0 - 3 scale, none - lots):
  - Mean 2.2 for **learnings about what programs doing well**
    » Range = 1-3, Median = 2, 32% rated 3, 0% rated 0
  - Mean 2.1 for **learnings about evaluating programs**
    » Range = 1-3, Median = 2, 36% rated 3, 0% rated 0
  - Mean 2.1 for **learnings about what programs could do better**
    » Range = 1-3, Median = 2, 20% rated 3, 0% rated 0
  - Mean 1.9 for **made changes in data collected**
    » Range = 1-3, Median = 2, 35% rated 3, 0% rated 0
  - Mean 1.8 for **made changes in how data used**
    » Range = 0-3, Median = 2, 33% rated 3, 13% rated 0
  - Mean 1.8 for **made changes in program delivery**
    » Range = 0-3, Median = 2, 31% rated 3, 6% rated 0
  - Mean 1.6 for **learnings about planning programs**
    » Range = 0-3, Median = 2, 14% rated 3, 14% rated 0
  - Mean 1.9 **across 7 items**
    » Range = 0.7-2.9, Median = 2, 29% rated > 2, 8% rated < 1
Feedback (6)

- Ratings of outcomes of CCYP collaboration (0 - 3 scale, none - lots):
  - Mean 2.0 for change in benefits for clients
    » Range = 0-3, Median = 2, 27% rated 3, 7% rated 0
  - Mean 1.9 for change in amount of interaction with other services
    » Range = 1-3, Median = 2, 27% rated 3, 0% rated 0
  - Mean 1.9 for change in worker satisfaction with programs
    » Range = 1-3, Median = 2, 25% rated 3, 0% rated 0
  - Mean 1.7 for change in awareness about other relevant services
    » Range = 0-3, Median = 2, 20% rated 3, 10% rated 0
  - Mean 1.6 for change in client satisfaction with programs
    » Range = 1-3, Median = 2, 7% rated 3, 0% rated 0
  - Mean 1.3 for change in who accesses programs
    » Range = 0-3, Median = 2, 9% rated 3, 36% rated 0
  - Mean 1.2 for change in who plans / reviews programs
    » Range = 0-3, Median = 1, 8% rated 3, 38% rated 0
  - Mean 1.6 across 7 items
    » Range = 0.5-2.4, Median = 1.6, 22% rated > 2, 11% rated < 1
Summary / Conclusions (1)

• **Community-based organisations** are providing services
  - they need to know what they are delivering (process eval) & what they are achieving (outcome eval)
  - so they can reflect on how they may be able to improve either aspect

• **Program participants** are receiving services
  - they need to express their views/perspectives/needs & think about the strengths & weaknesses of the services being received
  - so they can reflect on & communicate how they may be able to do it better

• **Funders** are distributing $$ for programs & services
  - they need to know & be able to demonstrate (to the public, their Board, etc) what their funds are achieving
  - so they can reflect on how they may be able to improve either aspect
• **Research & evaluation community** (through groups based in Unis, Govt Depts, etc)
  - have an obligation to share their expertise, to reflect on how they may be able to improve their methods and/or processes to make them more easily & widely shared & to be more inclusive of groups &/or individuals who've been less engaged by existing eval methods

• **This will be best achieved when we all work together**
  - To accept and share responsibility for developing/ designing eval processes capable of capturing, without diminishing, what is actually being delivered & achieved in such community-based programs & of guiding their ongoing improvement &/or evolution

• **This paper overviews one attempt to do this!**
Thank you