Empowerment Evaluation:
Reconciling the Theory with the Practice. An Evaluation of a Peer Sexuality Support Programme.

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ABSTRACT

The Peer Sexuality Support Programme is a school-based programme run at a Wellington College with the help of the Family Planning Association. For over five years the Family Planning Association has trained groups of students to become Peer Support People for their peers. I undertook an evaluation of this programme for my Masters Thesis in 1998. My overall goal for the evaluation was I wanted it to be a beneficial experience for the people involved in the programme. The evaluation needed to be carried out in line with the philosophies of the programme. The Peer Support People ran the programme so it was critical for them to be closely involved in any evaluation of <u>their</u> programme.

I chose to focus on the empowerment approach as this method fitted well with what I wanted to do. However, one of the challenges I faced was reconciling the theory of this evaluation method with the reality of actually undertaking such an evaluation. I needed to be realistic about what I could achieve in evaluating a youth lead programme which had minimal resources and with people who had very limited time to give to the evaluation.

The evaluation that resulted was beneficial to the programme. It demonstrated to the Peer Support People, the school, and the Family Planning Association that the programme is extremely worthwhile; and it identified areas that could be improved to make the programme more effective. Taking the empowerment approach and involving programme participants when ever possible helped demystify the process of 'evaluation'.

THE PEER SEXUALITY SUPPORT PROGRAMME

This Peer Sexuality Support Programme is an innovative approach by the Family Planning Association to sexuality education. The programme has been running for approximately five years at a Wellington College and is based on the Peer Education Model. Peer Education is about empowering young people with the skills and knowledge to enable them to become support for their peers.

The aim of the Peer Sexuality Support Programme is to train groups of students to:

- provide up-to-date and accurate information on sexual health issues for their peers;

- communicate appropriately with students and adults;
- refer students to helping agencies within their community;
- be a positive influence as role models for their peers. (FPA; 1994)

A key aspect of the programme was that the Family Planning Association wanted the students to have control over the direction the programme would take:

"The students will know the culture of the school – let them tell us how best to get it going…let's see how it evolves". (Family Planning Manager)

EMPOWERMENT APPROACH

Empowerment evaluation is closely aligned with the philosophies underpinning the Peer Sexuality Support Programme:

Empowerment Evaluation:	Peer Education Model:
"Empowerment evaluation is the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination" (Fetterman; 1996)	*"Recognise the capacity and capabilities of young people to contribute to the improvement of their sexual and reproductive health by involving them in decision-making, programme implementation and evaluation"* (IPPF; 1997)

David Fetterman (1996) is seen to be one of the founders of 'empowerment evaluation'. Outlined below is what he sees as the five essential characteristics of empowerment evaluation.

Five Essential Characteristics of Empowerment Evaluation:

1. Capacity

    Teaching people to conduct their own evaluations and thus become more self-sufficient

2. Evaluators act as facilitators rather than judges

    Evaluators can act as coaches or facilitators to help others conduct their evaluation

3. Evaluators act as advocates

    Advocate evaluators allow participants to shape the direction of the evaluation

4. Evaluation provides illumination

    Empowerment evaluation is illuminating on a number of levels

5. Liberation is an outcome for those involved

    Helping individuals take charge of their lives...liberates them from traditional expectations and roles...refines their identifies and future roles.

RECONCILING THE THEORY WITH THE PRACTICE

Although the concept of empowerment evaluation appealed to me, I found these five "essential" characteristics theoretical and idealistic. The first three characteristics seemed to be achievable however, the fourth and fifth appeared difficult to translate into a real situation. The overall challenge I faced throughout the evaluation was how to reconcile empowerment evaluation ideals with the reality of undertaking an evaluation with limited time and resources. Following is a brief summary of what happened in practice.

Training Session of Peer Support People

I attended five training sessions of the Peer Support People. The purpose of attending these training sessions was to find out how the programme worked and the experiences of those involved. However, they also provided good opportunities to involve the Peer Support People in the evaluation process.

At the first training session I was given about 10 minutes to run through the planned evaluation with the Peer Support People and seek their feedback. The comments from the Peer Support People during this session were invaluable. In my original proposal I had planned to set up a recording system to monitor the work of the Peer Support People. This raised some concern among the Peer Support People about confidentiality:

"Why would we want to record it down? It's supposed to be confidential. That's why a lot of people have said they don't like school counsellors because they tell other teachers their problems, they are not confidential". (Peer Support Person)

In response to this first training session I modified my methodology and removed the recording system.

Student Survey

The Peer Support People were also involved in the students' survey. The purpose of the survey was to find out from a range of students if they had heard about the Peer Support People, what they thought about them, and if they would use a Peer Support Person. The training session provided an opportunity for the Peer Support People to comment on the student questionnaire. Their main concerns were that the students might not take the questionnaire seriously or even know what a Peer Support Person was. I also asked for volunteers to help distribute the questionnaires in form classes. The questionnaires were filled in during form time and were returned to the Peer Support People straight away. I quickly did an initial analysis of the questionnaires to enable me to feed back the results to the Peer Support People at the next training session. At this training session I gave each Peer Support Person a summary sheet of the student questionnaire. As a group we went through the results. The Peer Support People

found it interesting to see how well known they actually were and how seriously the students took the questionnaires. The involvement of the Peer Support People was invaluable, as it allowed them to see their part in the process.

I had also planned as one of my original aims to develop, alongside the Peer Support People an ongoing self-evaluation for their programme. I planned to facilitate a discussion with the aim of designing some sort of realistic, relevant and useful ongoing self-evaluation for the programme.

Unfortunately working in a school environment, particularly around the end of year senior exams, meant that time was limited. In the end it was not feasible to facilitate a session with the Peer Support People to design an ongoing self-evaluation. However, the Family Planning Association were very interested in this idea. Since I finished the evaluation the Family Planning Association has used this plan to work with the Peer Support People in developing their own on going self evaluation.

The Report for the Peer Support People
Throughout the evaluation process I was concerned about how to effectively convey the evaluation findings to the Peer Support People. My Master's Thesis would definitely not be written in a form that would be accessible to a group of teenagers. I decided to write a separate report for the Peer Support People.

I wanted the report to provide the Peer Support People with a good record of the programme, what they had achieved, and areas that were identified as needing improvement. I also wanted the report to look like a professional document, so I had them bound. I also included photos of them and a lot of their quotes.

Time was a crucial factor. I needed to get the report to them before they disappeared from school for senior exams. The maximum impact would be giving something to the Peer Support People, while they were still involved in the programme. It would be pointless producing something around the time my thesis was due, as this would be the following year - a lifetime away for teenagers.

I thought it would be most effective to go through the report with them as a group, rather than them just receiving a copy. In reality giving the reports to the Peer Support People *personally* was not feasible due to the timing with the end of year senior exams. Instead I dropped the reports off at the school with a letter attached to each of the reports. The letter individually thanked them for allowing me to evaluate their programme and explaining how they could find

the thesis in the university library in the future. I also dropped two reports to the health teacher, suggesting one would be a good resource for the school library. It felt disappointing to do it this way but it was a perfect example of the need to keep flexible and realistic throughout the evaluation process.

The feedback I received from the Family Planning Association was that the Peer Support People loved the report, particularly how professional it looked. They also thought the photos were really 'choice'.

CONCLUSION

The evaluation that resulted was a working version of the theoretical and idealistic method. It did capture elements of Fettermans five essential characteristics of empowerment evaluation.

I was not directly able to *"act as a facilitator"* or to teach the Peer Support People how *"to conduct their own evaluation"*. However, as a direct result of the evaluation the Family Planning Association are helping the Peer Support People to develop their own on going evaluation of the programme. I was able to involve the Peer Support People to *"shape the direction of the evaluation"*, although the level of involvement might not have been 'ideal'. Like many community based programmes the actual running of the programme takes the majority of the time and resources available. I needed to be realistic as to what I could achieve and what I could expect from the people involved in the programme.

I do not think that as a direct result of the evaluation *"Illumination"* or *"Liberation"* was achieved for the people involved in the programme. What it has done is show how evaluation can be useful in programme development. It has provided a good evaluation base for both their own self evaluations and/or any future larger scale outcome evaluations.

I think empowerment approach to evaluation for community based programmes can hold many advantages if it is approached realistically. This has been highlighted as one of the complexities in applying the empowerment model of evaluation, that while it reasonable to ask programmes to assess what they are doing, it needs to be in a way that is practical and relevant for the programme. (Rose-Millar; 1997)

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BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

Name:	Kathryn Mickell
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Current Position:	Evaluator for Occupational Safety and Health (OSH), Wellington, New Zealand

I am very interested in the peer education approach to sexuality education for young people. I focused my two-year Masters course around these interests. In the first year my Masters research placement was at the Ministry of Youth Affairs where I wrote a number of briefing papers on issues concerning sexuality education and young people. My second Masters research placement was working with a youth group to help identify issues for young people in their area. My hope for the future is to undertake more work as a researcher/evaluator in this area.