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THE POWER OF "EVALUATION READINESS" IN PROGRAM EVALUATION

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of Evaluation Readiness, and recommends a framework of readiness for use with collaborative program evaluation. Evaluation Readiness can have an impact at all stages of an evaluation from the early stages when the sites are vying for funding through to the conclusion of the evaluation.

The value and worth of readiness is explored, a measurement of readiness is suggested, and it is hypothesised that there will be a positive and meaningful relationship between the readiness to evaluate and program progress. Readiness also can impact on the evaluation methodology and the format of information to be collected, can assist funders in predicting the likely success of proposals, and it can direct the evaluator as to where technical assistance is necessary.

An analysis of program progress and readiness in the external evaluation of 17 different school innovations is used to illustrate the power of Evaluation Readiness.

Key words: Program Evaluation, Readiness, Capacity, and Willingness

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Readiness, or preparedness for learning, as an educational concept has been hotly debated for decades. The debate has centred on the notion that children are developmentally either ready to learn or that children are ready as a consequence of the stimulation from society (e.g., parents and exposure to life). In the 1990s, early childhood educators used readiness to explain transition from kindergarten to school. Katz (1991), for example, explained that children need to be intellectually and socially ready for school and that schools need to be ready with appropriate staff and curriculum. Thus, readiness centres on preparedness to move on – either by the student or by the school.

Readiness has rarely been used in evaluation. Wholly (1987) referred to the concept of readiness in his work of evaluation assessment. He suggests that Evaluability Assessment provides an overall program view and that it is preparation for the evaluation. Stufflebeam's (1999) checklists for operations and for meta-evaluation also provide excellent criteria for assessing evaluations plans and capacity.

The focus of this paper is readiness for program evaluation as a developmental variable that is critical to assess throughout the evaluation process. Further, evaluation readiness provides valuable information about factors involved in the change process. The study suggests that evaluation readiness is a mediating variable in the successful determination of innovations in school settings. Evaluation readiness is defined as preparedness of the program to begin evaluation. This preparedness has two major characteristics: the capacity to evaluate and the willingness to evaluate.

Capacity to evaluate refers to the program's resources available for evaluation – resources such as material, time, human resources, organisational infrastructure, experience, and understanding of evaluation. Willingness refers to an attitude towards evaluation and a level of co-operation or desire to be involved in the evaluation process. Willingness to be part of the evaluation process is often determined by interest and previous experience. Many project staff work long hard hours and they firmly believe that such effort equates with successful outcomes. This time and cost of involvement is often used as a reason why further time and effort to be involved in the evaluation process is of little perceived value. As an example of willingness to be involved in evaluation, Stufflebeam (2001) described the beginning of an evaluation he was involved with, when the deputy superintendent -- a former army general -- called all the principals together at 7:00 a.m. on a Monday. He introduced Dr Stufflebeam, and told the principals he would fire any one of them who did not fully co-operate with the evaluator's requests regarding the evaluation. The principals did not like it but they co-operated fully with the evaluation. Willingness to evaluate often plays a major role in ensuring capacity.

Evaluation readiness is critical from two perspectives. It is a critical for access to credible data and in some cases actually obtaining such data, and it is difficult to conduct a collaborative style evaluation in a school unless the school is on-board with the evaluation and is willing take part in data collection and interpretation.

Evaluation readiness is a developmental process and with each step, the site participants need to be prepared to progress the evaluation. The implementation of the evaluation

plan follows the program implementation plan, and thus problematic evaluation implementation appears to be a symptom of a problematic innovation. Readiness provides useful information to evaluators and funders as to where support and assistance might be needed.

In conducting the current evaluation of several school innovations and exploring the notion of readiness, several issues emerged. In a school where a seemingly sensible innovation was delivered by one teacher, who had the roles of deputy principal as well as teaching a regular class, the school personnel confessed that they had no time to collect the data as part of the evaluation, did not return calls for telephone interviews or face to face interviews, were reluctant to participate in the evaluation, and confessed a distrust with evaluation. Can the idea behind this innovation be fairly evaluated? How does this compare to the school with an externally resourced innovation that has an extensive internal evaluation by an experienced evaluator and an over zealous desire to provide information to the external evaluator. Which program is more likely to be re-funded, to be sustained, and have the highest likelihood of improvement and impact on the outcomes?

This paper outlines a preliminary study to determine the nature of evaluation readiness and its influence on the innovation progress. While conducting the external evaluation, we monitored the evaluation readiness of 17 school innovations and attempted to determine the relationship between readiness and progress of the innovation.

1.1 The Innovations Projects
In 1998, the New Zealand Government allocated 1million dollars of competitive funding to an Innovation Funding Pool to support at-risk students. The aim of the funding was to provide funding to trial and evaluate new ideas to support change in schools. The school were spread over a wide geographical region of New Zealand and served a variety of ages and ethnicity's -- several programs specifically catered for Maori students. While the providers were to conduct internal evaluations and report bi-annually to the Ministry of Education, the providers were also to provide information as required by the Ministry of Education appointed external evaluator.

The evaluation was collaborative in nature with both the Ministry of Education and providers having an active role in the developing the evaluation plan and questions. The structure of the evaluation was provided by the CIPP Model (Stufflebeam, 2000). Table 1 presents the crosswalk that outlines the evaluation questions. The schools applied for the funding in 1998, the programs began implementing their programs in March 1999, and the external evaluation began in August 1999.

Table 1. Crosswalk of the specific evaluation questions and the method of data collection

Specific Evaluation Questions	Interviews	Focus Group	Website	Journals	Standardised Testing	Existing Documentation	Survey
Context							
What is the aim of Program	X					X	
Who is the target population	X					X	
What is the criteria of the selection of target population						X	
Describe the demographics of the target population						X	X
What is the context of Program and how will it match with the target population, include Maori						X	X
Who are the providers and their background information						X	
Describe baseline achievement data of target population e.g.6yr nets, PAT's					X	X	
Describe baseline achievement data of control population e.g.6yr nets, PAT's			X		X	X	X
What specially about your Program is appropriate for Maori students			X			X	X
Data particular to Maori Students			X			X	X
Is there an Internal Evaluation plan? What is the process of this internal evaluation?	X					X	
Is there funding from other than MOE Is there a self-funding development plan	X						
Input							
What is the intended Program outline						X	
What is the duration or number of session's etc?						X	
How much of actual Program was delivered			X			X	X
What input was received from Evaluators and MOE was received			X				X
What, if any, Professional development did providers receive				X			X
What is the nature of internal Evaluation Plan	X					X	
Describe funding plans	X					X	

Specific Evaluation Questions	Interviews	Focus Group	Website	Journals	Standardised Testing	Existing Documentation	Survey
Describe Outside funding plan	X					X	
Process							
What is the mode of Program delivery e.g. Classroom based, 1:1			X			X	X
Describe the Monitoring Process	X					X	
Describe Numbers who attend						X	
Describe Outside assistance e.g. consultants, parents	X		X				X
Outline Extra activities	X		X				X
Outline the internal Evaluation Process	X		X				X
Outline how the outside development funds plan is implemented	X	X					
What is the nature of Collaboration with other schools e.g. sharing information with other schools?	X	X					X
What is the nature of Networking with similar Programs	X						X
Product							
Are the Intended outcomes achieved		X	X				X
What is the impact on achievement outcomes	X	X	X		X	X	X
What is the impact on Psychosocial outcomes e.g. self –esteem,		X	X		X		X
How do outcomes compare with National?					X	X	
What is the nature of Stakeholder satisfaction?		X					
Was the information disseminated?			X				X
Describe Unintended outcomes		X					
Is there a self sufficient internal Evaluation Plan		X				X	
Is the Program self funding		X				X	

2.0 METHOD

During the early phase of the evaluation, we analysed all program proposals to determine the depth and quality of the evaluation plans. We also examined the feedback from the Ministry of Education's assessment for selection of the innovations. Further, we interviewed Ministry of Education staff involved with the funding pool and program providers about collaborative evaluation. Workshops were conducted with providers to further develop the relationship between the internal and external evaluations. Baseline indices of program progress and readiness to evaluate were formulated using this data. Predictions of future progress of innovations and programs in need of evaluation assistance were identified. During 2000 and 2001 these indices were developed to reflect the progress of the projects and evaluation readiness. Table 2 describes the criteria for each index. Comparisons were made between program progress and readiness indices over a three year period. Correlations were also calculated.

Table 2:Criteria for Evaluation Readiness and Program Progress

1999	Criteria
Progress	Length of time the program had been operational.
	Number of cohort who had completed the project.
	Whether the set up was completed.
	Has anything happened (yes or no).
Evaluation Readiness	Experience and attitude with evaluation (workshops or telephone interview).
	Management of the evaluation (Initiative management interview).
	Quality of Evaluation Proposal.
	Program Proposal as scored by Ministry of Education (external score).
2000	
Progress	Ministry of Education & Evaluation reports based on progress of 6 stages of implementation and out puts.
Evaluation Readiness	
Capacity	Quality and depth of report and requested data as scored by evaluation team
Willingness	Attitude to evaluation as determined by telephone interview and compliance by handing in report and evaluation data.
2001	(still approximate as programs are concluding)
Progress	Based on four categories Change Sustainability Development and integration as well as their progress reports, which outline 6 levels of outputs and implementation.
Evaluation Readiness:	
Willingness	Attitude to the final evaluation in final report and telephone attitude. Final report is handed in. Impact data handed in.
Capacity	Completion of evaluation data, quality and depth of report, impact, and interviews as scored b evaluation team.

3.0 RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Readiness i.e., willingness and capacity and progress were monitored over a three-year period. The scores were converted to an index out of 100 for ease of reporting. The scores were graphed to illustrate relationships between readiness and progress. The scores were divided into four groups: those where readiness decreased over the period, those where readiness

indices remained constant, those who were exemplary and constant in readiness and whose readiness scores increased.

3.1 Innovations with Declining Readiness.

(Figure 1 here)

There were five schools where readiness declined. As indicated by the graph three school School B, School C, and School D were on a continual decline for readiness and progress. Implementation and evaluation did not occur in an effective manner. The other schools had a different story. School E had a relatively steady progress but they were very resistant to the evaluation. The evaluation did not suit their purpose. School A were very willing to be involved in the evaluation, however they appeared to run out of steam, particularly as the innovation struggled with staffing changes and absences. Thus, the delivery of the final data collection (such as impact surveys, individual student data, attending interviews) was not a high priority.

A close look at these schools in terms of their willingness and capacity to be collaboratively involved in evaluation illustrated that *willingness* contributed more to the readiness for evaluation. During discussions about evaluation we heard comments like. '*I don't believe in evaluation,*' *'we will not participate in evaluation until we are being paid'*   *the evaluation will affect the other research project we are doing'*. Willingness appears to play a large role in determining the capacity to evaluate. Comments relating to capacity were '
'I just can't'; ' It's not on computer'; ' The data went missing'

3.2 Innovations with increasing readiness
(Figure 2 here)

There were three schools where the evaluation started with difficulty -- the quality and depth of reporting was poor in 1999 and early in 2000. Comments about evaluation from these schools often related to time and rejection of evaluation: '*I am too busy teaching to fill out all these forms ""; the evaluation was unfair'; the evaluation can't show anything."* Two of these schools later responded well to site visits and technical assistance. The third school had a great deal of contact in early in 2001 leading to some positive developments in their program and evaluation information. The positive student reaction to the innovation program appeared to increase the schools willingness and capacity to produce the required information.*"* Willingness and capacity for these schools contributed equally to evaluation readiness.

Innovation where Readiness remained Constant
There were two groups in this category those with a high level of readiness and those with an average level of readiness.

3.3 Innovations with High and Constant levels of Readiness
(Figure 3 here)
There are four schools in this category. The baseline indices in 1999 was a good predictor of both progress and evaluation readiness. These schools all produced good quality data, were always on time, they attended all workshops, and were very vocal about the nature and

importance of the evaluation. These schools were zealots for evaluation and all produced meaningful data. It is also interesting to note that these schools were our greatest critics (albeit constructive) of the evaluation and evaluation process. They were also the most collaborative group in the evaluation and this impacted on our role as evaluators.

3.4 Innovations with Moderate but Consistent Readiness Levels

(Figure 4 here)

There were three schools in this category. The pattern of readiness followed the pattern of progress over the three year. Only School N appeared to have a problem during the process and this was due to a change in the nature of the program and a staffing change. They were able to recover from the staffing issues and get back on track. These schools had reached their highest level of capacity and willingness in this evaluation and regardless of the number of site visits and contact with evaluators their readiness did not change.

3.5 Overall relationships

To illustrate the worth of monitoring readiness we correlated the readiness and progress scores.

Table 3. Correlation Coefficients for Readiness and Program Progress.

	Readiness 1999	Readiness 2000	Readiness 2001	Progress 1999	Progress 2000	Progress 2001
Progress 1999	.01	.89	.58	1.0	.80	.59
Progress 2000	.101	.86	.39	.80	1.0	.62
Progress 2001	.15	.81	.88	.59	.61	1.0
Readiness 1999	1.0	.11	.09	.96	.10	.14
Readiness 2000	.11	1.0	.62	.89	.86	.82
Readiness 2001	.01	.62	1.0	.58	.39	.89

The schools all had to submit an extensive proposal, which was assessed by the Ministry of Education for competitive funding. In these proposal the schools had to outline steps to be taken in developing their program as well as clear indications about how they would evaluate the program. The schools also signed a contract agreeing that they would co-operate with Ministry appointed evaluators. The Ministry of Education's assessment, the evaluation team's assessment of the provider's evaluation plan and discussions with the program co-ordinators allowed us to make expectations about the capacity of the organisations to evaluation and suggest areas of concern for program development. As indicated in Table 3 these predictions

from the proposals were unfounded. The correlations between readiness in 1999 and subsequent progress were low and not statistically significant. Relying on suggested plans from the schools as to their claimed readiness is not enough to predict future success. Early progress scores were positively correlated with progress for the next year, however only moderately in the final year of the evaluation. Thus, the relationship is consistent.

The correlations indicate that the schools readiness in 2000, which were based on observed actions and attitudes (one year after commencement), is a much better prediction of progress in 2001 than actual progress in 2000. Successful implementation alone does not predict future progress; the willingness and capacity to evaluate is a better predictor of subsequent progress than initial progress.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

This study has developed the concept of readiness, outlined the key components of willingness to be collaborative and capacity to be involved in evaluation, and illustrated the connection between readiness and program progress.

We have specifically investigated the readiness to be involved in the evaluation process as a major mediating factor in determining the progress of innovations in school settings. There are several implications arising from this study.

As evaluators involved in collaborative evaluations is important to understand the capacity and willingness of the providers to evaluate throughout various stage of the evaluation. The determination of evaluation readiness at the proposal stage is often problematic inasmuch as the evaluator has to rely on plans rather than actions of the providers. As this study has indicated, proposals do not give clear indications of capacity and willingness to be involved in evaluation. They often promise more than they consequently appear willing and capable to deliver. Funders need to be more critical of proposals in assessing realistically a provider's capacity and willingness to be involved with the evaluation process.

It is critical to monitor the provider's actions in taking part in providing evaluation information throughout the evaluation process including follow-up, as this is an indication of a successful program implementation process. It is particularly important when turning to the summative phase of the evaluation. It is feasible that the readiness index can be factored into the over all results so as to determine the *true measure* of worth of the idea.

Evaluation technical assistance needs to be provided in the early stages of the evaluation and throughout the evaluation to help sustain the implementation of the evaluation. Providing evaluation support or technical assistance enhances the amount and quality of data when working collaborative evaluations. Readiness helps the evaluator understand the evaluation needs of the provider more specifically, and may in turn led to greater willingness and capability to be involved in evaluation.

Evaluation readiness is a critical variable in the change process. In some way, it mirrors the notion of readiness to change in psychological counselling. Gell, Cockell and Drab (2001), for example, developed an index of capacity and motivation to change. They tested the index

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with clients with eating disorders, and found that the index predicted enrolling in a program of change, a commitment to sustain change dropping out of change program, and difficulties with process. This process was more reliable than an assessment from therapy sessions. These elements of change are common to evaluation of change in school settings. The sustainability of innovations appears related to the willingness and capacity to be involved in the evaluation process.

The research on school change is clear innovations in schools require an organised collaborative climate that reflects on the need for the change, the process of implementation, the need for development and adaptation of the innovation. Evaluation is the vehicle for this reflection and evaluation readiness is the willingness and capacity to reflect.

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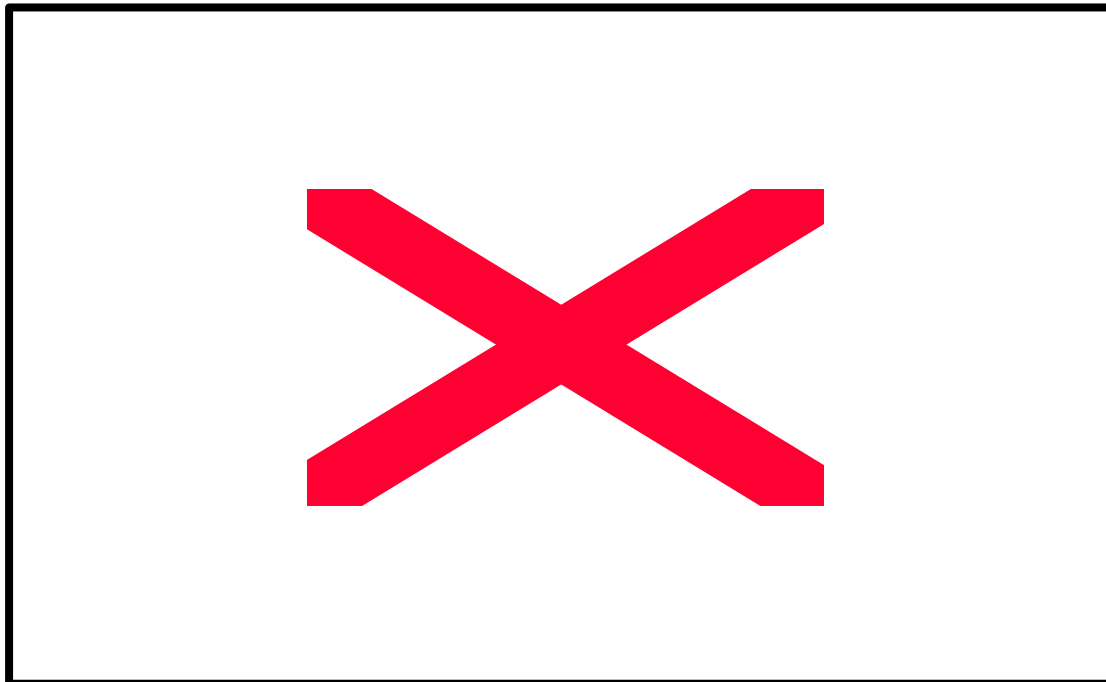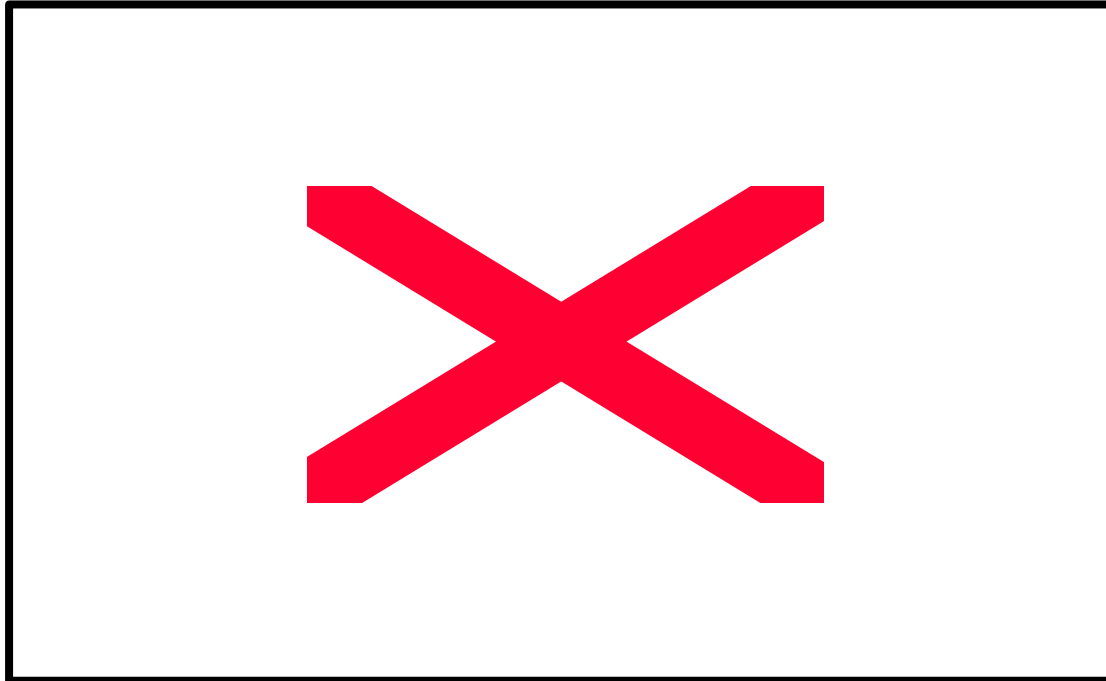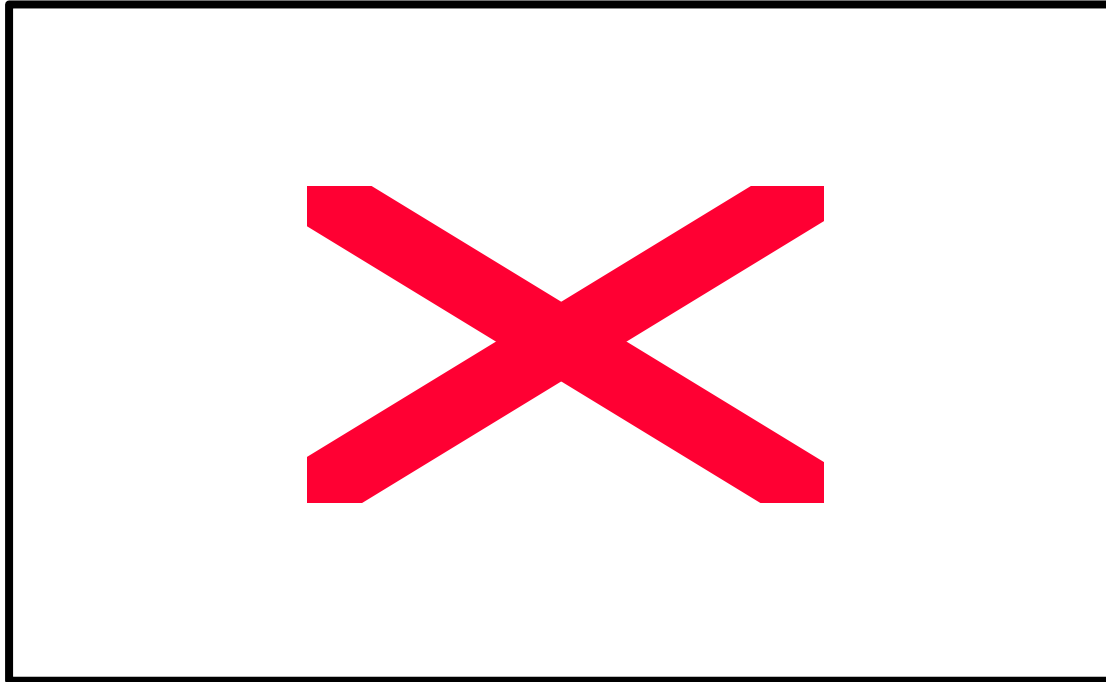
Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4