

Challenges and issues in applying empowerment evaluation principles in practice: Case study of the evaluation of a national school breakfast program

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Introduction

Participatory evaluations have been argued to contribute to the long-term sustainability and success of community-based programs by building evaluation capacities, improving programs in ways that better meet community needs, and developing local solutions to problems and issues (Papineau & Kiely 1996; Rebien 1996). Indeed Diez (2001, p. 907) suggests that this approach can be a useful tool to 'mobilise communities for regional action, empower local agents and enhance learning capacity'. Furthermore, collaborative and participatory forms of evaluation are considered particularly useful in assessing the impacts of 'more complex system change and comprehensive community initiatives' (W.K. Kellogg Foundation 1998, p. 5).

In addition to high levels of community ownership and participation, empowerment evaluation (Fetterman 2001; Fetterman & Wandersman 2005) is distinguished by its clearly articulated principles. Ten key principles guide the decision-making and practices of empowerment evaluators: (1) improvement, (2) community ownership, (3) inclusion, (4) democratic participation, (5) social justice, (6) community knowledge, (7) evidence-based strategies, (8) capacity building, (9) organisational learning, and (10) accountability (see Wandersman et al 2005). However, while applying these principles in practice is often a complex and difficult process, there has been little published on the problems and challenges in conducting empowerment evaluations. For example, Cousins (2005) has called for more details on power relations and how differences and conflicts are managed.

This paper provides insights into the challenges and issues that emerged in applying empowerment evaluation principles to the evaluation of the Good Start Breakfast Club (GSBC) program, which is conducted in complex organisational and community contexts. We present background information on the program and its key stakeholders, outline the initial empowerment evaluation process, then present a case study of the outcomes from six pilot evaluation workshops involving Australian Red Cross (ARC) personnel and volunteers and teaching staff from breakfast clubs in 10 primary schools in urban and regional New South Wales (NSW). These outcomes are

then assessed in relation to the 10 empowerment evaluation principles. Based on the many challenges and issues that arose in this project, we present some key learnings on the use of empowerment evaluation in complex contexts that involve multiple organisational layers, lay and professional staff and volunteers, dispersed localities, and imposed time considerations. This paper builds on previous publications on this project by Miller and Lennie (2005a and 2005b).

The GSBC evaluation project: Background and initial activities

The ARC operates the GSBC program in 120 primary schools around Australia with sponsorship and support from the Sanitarium Health Food Company and other organisations. It has expanded rapidly from 65 to 120 clubs in the last 18 months with a further 100 applications having been received. Such rapid growth is accompanied by sustainability concerns, the need to secure additional funding commitments from current sponsors and to improve the level of government support which the program receives. Senior ARC and Sanitarium managers in the Research Partnership Group (RPG) for the GSBC evaluation project considered that hard data on program effects were critical to securing the support needed.

Empowerment evaluation had demonstrated strengths and simplicity, and fitted well with the values and objectives of the GSBC initiative. The three steps of empowerment evaluation (see Fetterman 2001) were used during initial workshops. A long term aim was that evaluation became part of planning and managing the program, thus contributing to ongoing improvement and learning.

Fieldwork began in April 2005 when a questionnaire receiving 41 returns, was sent to GSBC teaching staff and volunteers in most regions. The first empowerment evaluation workshop was held in May 2005 with 19 state and regional GSBC coordinators and managers employed by ARC. Two workshops followed in July 2005 with teachers and volunteers directly responsible for the GSBC in schools. The twelve participants represented breakfast clubs in eight schools – five in the Sydney and Greater Western regions of Sydney and three in the Western region of NSW.

The RPG became engaged in the process via a half-day evaluation workshop in October 2005, thus connecting work completed in May and July with work that would follow. This group short-listed seven key activities for immediate evaluation, based on the program activities suggested for evaluation at previous workshops, discussed their strengths and weaknesses, provided feedback about the empowerment evaluation approach, and indicated their willingness to take part in future evaluation activities.

During these initial activities baseline data about the perceived effectiveness of a range of key program activities and strategies for their improvement was assembled and ways of assessing the impacts of the program on children identified. The workshops enabled participants to share information, ideas and experiences, gain knowledge and understanding of participatory program evaluation and provided the basis for future evaluation activities. Their collective knowledge laid the foundation for the intensive work that was to occur at six pilot sites in December 2005.

Case study of six pilot sites for the GSBC evaluation

A second phase of workshops with six pilot sites were designed to collaboratively plan and design the evaluation of the selected GSBC program activities, building on the work undertaken in previous workshops.

Planning the workshops

Workshops were held at pilot sites from 5 - 9 December 2005. They were conducted at this less than ideal time of the year due to funding for the workshops not becoming available until early November and the need to plan the data collection to be undertaken at breakfast club sites in the first term of 2006. As in previous workshops, getting sufficient numbers of volunteers, teachers and ARC staff for some workshop sites proved difficult, particularly at this busy time of the year.

Two workshops were held in Sydney, one in Greater Western Sydney and three in Western NSW. Sites were chosen based on previous support shown for the evaluation by program personnel in each location. Potential participants were contacted by phone or email to invite them to attend, with some invitations distributed to teachers and parents through regional ARC coordinators. Consultations were conducted via teleconference and email in the week before the workshops to discuss the choice of key GSBC activity (see Table 1) that would be the focus for each group and to review the process that had led to the list of activities being chosen for investigation.

Table 1: Key GSBC activities addressed at the six pilot sites

Workshop group	Key GSBC activity
Sydney A (SA)	Providing a healthy breakfast to children in greatest need
Sydney B (SB)	Positively changing or influencing the eating habits of children
Western Sydney (WS)	Local and school community adopts changed attitudes and behaviour towards breakfast/Gaining community support
Western NSW A (WNSWA)	Improving the life skills of children attending the GSBC / Social interaction in GSBC environment
Western NSW B (WNSWB)	Recruiting, training and retaining volunteers
Western NSW C (WNSWC)	Improving the learning capacity / learning environment of children attending the GSBC

While nine of the activities reflected the RPG's desire to focus the evaluation on the benefits to participating children, the chosen activities were well accepted by the pilot sites as in keeping with the evaluation ideas of the broader GSBC community.

Workshop participants

As Table 2 shows, most participants (74.5%) were GSBC volunteers or school coordinators, while 16% were school staff (including senior staff and teaching staff), and 16% were ARC coordinators or managers. Of the volunteers or volunteer coordinators, 11 held professional or semi-professional positions, three held non-professional positions, four undertook home or parental duties, one was a university student, and seven were retired. A disappointing aspect of this mix of participants is that very few teachers were involved. This was particularly problematic for the WNSWC workshop.

Workshop process

The facilitators provided an overview of the workshop aims and process, brief information on the evaluation method, the work previously undertaken in the evaluation, and a brief discussion of the key activities being investigated by the six workshop groups. Previous goals were reviewed along with the strategies and

evidence related to the evaluation of the activity before deciding on the most important goals for the evaluation in the short term. Brainstorming was then conducted to draw out ideas that would lead to the development of appropriate evaluation questions and methods. People who could be involved in the evaluation and what they could contribute were identified, along with possible risks. Finally the next steps involved in planning the evaluation were decided and feedback questionnaires distributed. This process varied in workshop WNSWC where no prior work had been done on the activity selected. Most of this workshop therefore involved developing the goals, strategies and evidence related to the evaluation of the key activity to be addressed.

Table 2: Number and roles of pilot workshop participants in each location

	Volunteer	GSBC Coord. (school)	Teacher/ school staff	Principal/ Assistant Principal	ARC Coord.	ARC Manager	Total responses
Sydney A	4	2	2		-		8
Sydney B	8	1	-		1		10
Western Sydney	4	1	1		1	1	8
WNSWA	2	1	1	1	2	1	8
WNSWB	1	1	-	1		1	4
WNSWC	5	2	1				8
Total responses	24	8	5	2	4	3**	46
% responses (n= 46)*	52	17.5	11	4	9	6.5	100
% participants (n=43)	56	18.5	11.5	4.5	9	7	106.5

* Three participants (one each in Sydney A, WNSWA and WNSWC) held teaching or school staff positions as well as positions as GSBC coordinators or volunteers in their school

** The same ARC Manager attended both the WNSWA and WNSWB workshops but is counted twice

Outcomes from the workshops

As Table 3 indicates, a wide range of methods was proposed to undertake the evaluation at each site, with surveys being the most frequently suggested method. Common ideas included the need to keep the evaluation as simple as possible and to integrate some tasks into school curricula. Possible risks associated with the evaluation also were identified, such as the potential for the evaluation to have negative impacts on children and/or their parents or carers and that a lot of work could be done with no real benefit to the program and its clients.

Feedback on the pilot evaluation workshops

Feedback on the workshops was provided via questionnaires distributed to participants after each workshop. Responses were obtained from 35 of the 43 participants (29 women and six men) who took part in the six workshops.

The majority of participants (70.5%) thought the workshop methods were either 'quite' or 'very' effective for collaboratively planning the evaluation of key GSBC activities and developing the evaluation tools. However, three WS workshop participants assessed the methods as 'not at all' effective. They considered that the language was not 'volunteer-friendly', and that they or others did not understand the discussion or lacked knowledge of the topic. The most valuable outcomes of the

workshops included the evaluation methods, strategies and plans, the discussion about issues and concerns, gaining a better understanding of the program or other breakfast clubs, greater understanding about issues related to the program or the views of others, and meeting other staff and volunteers.

A small number of participants expressed concerns or uncertainty about various aspects of the evaluation or their capacity to conduct the evaluation, or were confused about the workshop aims. Suggestions for improvement included:

- More prior consultation and planning to ensure the time and location of the workshops and the workshop topics and schools represented are appropriate.
- Further clarify the workshop aims and agenda and provide clear explanations of the evaluation process.
- Simplify the language as much as possible to include all participants.
- Use a wider range of communication and participation methods to engage and involve participants and build evaluation capacity.
- Increase the representation of ARC managers, other senior staff, and teachers.

In terms of capacity building, 40% of participants thought their knowledge and understanding of participatory program evaluation had been enhanced 'very' or 'extremely well', while 49% thought their knowledge was enhanced 'quite' or 'reasonably well'. However, four WS workshop participants thought their knowledge was 'not at all' enhanced. Participants with both high and low levels of prior knowledge reported that the workshop had increased their knowledge and understanding. While most of the participants (71%) were willing to take part in future evaluation activities, 25% were unsure and some were uncertain about how much time they could actually commit.

The mostly positive outcomes and feedback on the pilot evaluation workshops indicated that the methods used to plan and conduct the workshops were generally effective for engaging community volunteers, school and ARC staff and others in the evaluation and building some evaluation capacities. However, there were some unintended outcomes and the overall feedback from the WS workshop participants was significantly less positive than the feedback from the other workshops, even though the workshop and consultation process was very similar. Explanations for this outcome included that some participants felt under pressure to attend but the time of year was unsuitable; the key program activity selected for the workshop was more difficult for the volunteers to contribute to, compared with the ARC and school staff; previous work on the key activity was undertaken by the RPG and ARC coordinators and managers, rather than by volunteers; and two of the volunteers had very limited knowledge of the program and the local community.

Evaluation activities following the pilot workshops

At the end of each December pilot workshop, every group made a commitment to progress their evaluation initiatives as soon as was practicable in the new year. Individuals volunteered to facilitate the process and to call evaluation team meetings. Detailed reports were sent to all workshop participants with the suggestion that these be used to guide the evaluation process. Contact was made with the nominated person from each group after the summer break.

The high energy and commitment generated at most of the workshops subsequently met with a typical cluster of setbacks. At management level, staff changes within the ARC and other factors resulted in a lack of effective collaboration and organisational support to follow-up the workshops. At the pilot evaluation team level, initial enthusiasm diminished at a number of sites during the long summer break.

Table 3: Evaluation tools and methods proposed and under trial at the pilot sites

Location/participants/topic	Example of tools proposed	Tools under trial
Sydney A (n=7, two schools) <i>Providing a healthy breakfast to children in greatest need</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey teachers and volunteers to identify rate of attendance by vulnerable children and any stigma associated with club attendance Survey children in the school asking about such things as reasons for attending/not attending breakfast club 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Surveys returned from teachers at one school with other returns expected during Term 3
Sydney B (n=10, two schools) <i>Positively changing or influencing the eating habits of children</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A survey conducted in the classroom to compare breakfast eating habits of children attending the breakfast clubs with other children Record the food eaten at the club on particular days and use a plate waste technique to analyse the average nutrient uptake of children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Surveys completed by 153 students in Grades 1-8 at one school providing helpful feedback about the survey instrument and useful preliminary data Method to record total food consumed each day trialled at one school. Four weeks of data is ready for analysis
Western Sydney (n=8, one school) <i>Local and school community adopts changed attitudes and behaviour towards breakfast/ Gaining community support</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey children in classrooms asking what they eat for breakfast on weekends and on the days that the club does not operate Survey participating children's families, and families of non-participants to show direct or indirect 'filter effect' in changing attitudes and behaviour as a result of the breakfast club 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It appears the WS group may have pulled out of the pilot evaluation process but, given its similar objectives, WS may collaborate with SB on trialling the healthy food choices surveys
Western NSW A (n=7, two schools) <i>Improving lifeskills of children/ Social interaction in GSBC</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interview participating children who appear to have positively changed their lifeskills and behaviour Use observation proformas to record children's behaviour and interactions in the breakfast club to assess changes over time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trial of the observation instrument is expected to take place in Term 3
Western NSW B (n=4, one school) <i>Recruiting, training and retaining volunteers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey breakfast club coordinators about training GSBC volunteers Survey volunteers about their training experiences, why they became involved and why they stay involved with the club 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trial of survey instruments is expected to take place in Term 3
Western NSW C (n=7, three schools) <i>Improving the learning capacity/ learning environment of children attending the GSBC</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey a sample of teachers and children about breakfast club attendance and changes in social behaviours Survey G1-2 and G3-6 asking students what they think about breakfast and breakfast club and whether attendance help them do well at school Survey high school students about the transition from the primary school's breakfast club to the high school's breakfast café 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Surveys on breakfast club attendance etc. have been returned from 20 teachers at two schools, providing helpful feedback about the instrument and useful preliminary data Surveys on the impacts on learning etc, have been returned from 72 students in G1-2 with G3-6 to be surveyed early in Term 3

When commitments made in December did not all eventuate, much of the work associated with the development of the trial evaluation tools, envisaged as a collaborative endeavour, fell to the doctoral student working on the research project (Wayne Miller). However, each of the tools he prepared reflected the ideas of the pilot evaluation teams who had suggested their development, and feedback on the tools was sought from pilot team members before being administered. Table 3 provides examples of the evaluation methods that were proposed at the pilot evaluation workshops and details of the actual tools under trial at the pilot sites.

A particularly high level of community ownership was evident at the WNSWC site, due to effective communication and information management by a former Deputy Principal who facilitated the local evaluation team. This participant is President of the Rotary Club and a strong supporter of the school breakfast programs at the local primary school and high school. A key outcome of the evaluation in this site is that the breakfast club, which formerly struggled for recognition by primary school staff as an integral part of the school, is now enjoying a higher profile that has improved the morale of those responsible for the day-to-day operation of the club. Concern in this pilot site that students from primary schools with breakfast clubs were being disadvantaged in the transition to high school also led to the design of a survey of students at a nearby high school in the WNSWC area which has operated a successful breakfast café for six years. Useful preliminary data has been received from the 110 respondents from Grades 7-9.

Assessing the outcomes in relation to empowerment evaluation principles

Table 4 summarises outcomes of the evaluation in relation to the 10 empowerment evaluation principles and some of the challenges and issues that emerged.

Table 4: Summary of outcomes in relation to the 10 empowerment evaluation principles

Evaluation outcomes	Challenges and issues
1. Improvement	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key areas of program improvement identified and strategies for improving activities and indicators developed • Design and trial of tools to assess changes • Preliminary results obtained • Some improvements have already occurred 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial high support for the evaluation waned in most pilot areas due to long breaks between activities and other factors • The evaluation agenda of participants at different program levels focused on different issues, eg program impacts rather than improvements
2. Community ownership	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High community ownership of program but some parents and principals unsupportive • Significant ownership of the evaluation demonstrated in one pilot area in particular 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of a supportive ARC coordinator slowed progress at one pilot site • Gaining a common understanding of the evaluation's aim and purpose was difficult
3. Inclusion	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A wide diversity of program stakeholders have collaborated in the evaluation • Children have only taken part in surveys • Parents and/or carers have not been involved yet but could be in the future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More teachers and ARC staff would have improved outcomes in some pilot workshops • Some participants felt disempowered due to lack of knowledge of workshop topic • Engaging volunteers and teaching staff,

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusion and stigma issues related to breakfast clubs have emerged in workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> encouraging continuous participation, and providing ongoing support was problematic
4. Democratic participation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A range of methods was used to encourage democratic participation Initial workshops used democratic processes Consultations were held to decide key activities each pilot area would focus on 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only some workshop participants took part in teleconferences to decide key activities Ensuring equal and democratic participation was challenging in some pilot evaluation planning workshops
5. Social justice	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commitment to social justice was shown in workshops and mission and vision Workshop reports included details of the disadvantaged status of local communities and families and other social justice issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concerns that a strong focus on key activities could result in neglecting the bigger picture of social disadvantage and that evaluation could contribute to stereotypes of parents as 'neglectful'
6. Community knowledge	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local community and organisational knowledge of the program and local context was drawn on significantly Community knowledge was used to design appropriate evaluation tools and questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluation agenda of Sanitarium and ARC management overshadowed community agenda and knowledge in some workshops Evaluation tools were designed by the doctoral student rather than the pilot teams
7. Evidence-based strategies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community knowledge was combined with evidence-based strategies where possible 12 evaluation instruments have been prepared for trial with preliminary results now in from five surveys administered at three sites with responses from 323 students and 22 teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategies with an experimental design have greater value in the eyes of the industry partners The utility of tools associated with an experimental design has to be weighed against the desire for 'practical' evaluation methods and tools that the pilot teams could use
8. Capacity building	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ways of improving training and support for volunteers were identified Most workshop participants increased understanding about empowerment evaluation, planning an evaluation, identifying questions, and developing tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training in all relevant aspects of evaluation was unable to be provided due to limited funding, thus limiting the methods used An evaluation toolkit is to be developed but training and support will also be needed There was dependence on the doctoral student for design of surveys and data analysis
9. Organisational learning	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issues identified in initial workshops were included in ARC's strategic plan for program Strategies have been used to improve some program areas and gain school support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ARC's commitment to the evaluation was inconsistent Some program personnel did not seem open to ongoing learning
10. Accountability	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An evaluation toolkit is to be developed that will enable ongoing accountability It is too early to assess the changes that have occurred as a result of the evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More rigorous data collection processes were identified as required Program staff and volunteers have variable levels of commitment to accountability

Key learnings

Based on the above case study and critical reflections on the project, the following key learnings have been identified:

A high level of organisational and community support is vital to an effective empowerment evaluation, particularly where multiple stakeholders (including

volunteers and lay and professional staff), dispersed localities, and multi-faceted programs are involved. Following the pilot evaluation workshops, progress in the pilot sites was highest where there was significant support from key community participants, school principals and teachers.

Appropriate timing of evaluation planning workshops is critical to maintain momentum following preliminary empowerment evaluation workshops. The initial enthusiasm and interest of community groups can quickly be lost if the gap between planning the evaluation, developing the tools, and implementing the tools is too great.

The role of community champions is also critical. Even when there were initially high levels of enthusiasm in the pilot workshop teams, progress was slow without the active ongoing support of key stakeholders or champions in the evaluation. As Lennie et al (2005, p.10) suggest, champions need to be committed to their community, use empowering processes, and have good networks and communication skills.

Participation of appropriate people is important to successful outcomes. While the ideal is to involve a broad diversity of stakeholders and community members, effective participation in evaluation planning workshops requires a certain level of prior knowledge, skills and experience. Involving participants with very low levels of knowledge or understanding of evaluation, the key program activities being discussed, or the local context can produce disempowerment and other unintended outcomes.

The context in which an empowerment evaluation is conducted affects its overall success. The GSBC evaluation was undertaken as part of a university research project conducted by a doctoral student and his supervisors. This meant that certain timeframes were imposed on the evaluation. It also affected support for the project among some participants.

Conclusions

The outcomes of this project have confirmed the value and importance of several empowerment evaluation principles, including improvement, democratic participation, community knowledge, capacity building, inclusion and the use of evidence-based strategies. It has also highlighted a number of challenges and issues that need to be considered and various practical considerations. These issues include the time commitments required, the need for adequate resources and appropriate timing of activities, and problems in communicating with distant participants. Strategies are also required to maintain initial interest and enthusiasm, such as involving committed champions who can build the confidence of others.

The evaluation of the pilot workshops demonstrated that significant amounts of time and energy and adequate resources are required to effectively plan empowerment evaluation workshops, prepare suitable workshop materials, engage with diverse community and stakeholder groups, and consult with participants on key program activities to be addressed by each group. In addition, issues related to power and knowledge and the diverse agendas of key stakeholders and participants need to be taken into account more in planning and conducting empowerment evaluations so as to avoid unintended effects on participants.

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