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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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This case study highlights the importance of testing evaluation theory within real life contexts, in this case involving multiple organisational layers, lay and professional staff and volunteers, dispersed localities and imposed time considerations. Outcomes from six pilot evaluation workshops involving Good Start Breakfast Clubs (GSBC) in 10 primary schools in urban and regional New South Wales will be outlined. These workshops involved brainstorming ideas for practical evaluation tools which were subsequently developed and trialled by volunteers and teaching staff at the pilot sites.

As predicted by the empowerment evaluation approach, several positive outcomes were achieved, including: the active involvement and input of diverse stakeholders in planning and conducting the evaluation; open and honest discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of key program activities; and identification of effective ways to improve the program.

The empowerment evaluation process used in the GSBC project also raised many challenges and issues. They included: the time and energy required to engage and consult with volunteers and teaching staff; problems with maintaining initial enthusiasm and interest in the evaluation; difficulties in gaining a common understanding of the intent and purpose of the evaluation across different organisational levels; and limitations on the evaluation methods that could be confidently used by volunteers.

The complexity of this evaluation project has confirmed the value and importance of several empowerment evaluation principles, including democratic participation, capacity building and inclusion. However, it has also highlighted practical considerations critically important to this approach. These include time commitments and differential power and resource considerations.