



Striking a balance: A mixed-methods approach to impact-oriented evaluation



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ABSTRACT

It is commonsensical to assume that a program needs to be implemented in order to have an impact. However, most impact evaluation studies tend to pay little attention to the issue of program implementation. This paper argues for the *logical priority* of program implementation through a mixed-methods evaluation of a language intervention program initiated in one of the largest urban school districts in the United States. By selecting a mixed-methods evaluation approach, the evaluation yielded results that have implications for addressing implementation issues in an impact-oriented evaluation. At the local district level, the evaluation results of what works, what does not, and how the implementation varies across teachers and classrooms have a direct implication for program staff. They can use this information to monitor the program implementation and make necessary adjustments to enhance the effectiveness of the program so that the ultimate program goal can be accomplished.

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Though it seems commonsensical that a program needs to be implemented in order for it to have an impact, most impact evaluation studies tend to pay little attention to the issue of program implementation. Given the paucity of literature on the importance of the *logical priority* of program implementation over program impact, the purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, it describes a mixed-methods evaluation of a language intervention program initiated in one of the largest urban school districts in the U.S. Second, through this evaluation example, this paper addresses the importance of balancing evaluation questions about program implementation and impact when designing an impact oriented evaluation using a mixed-methods approach.

When prioritizing evaluation questions, evaluators typically need to deal with five program issues. These program issues include the need for the program, the program conceptualization and design, program operations and service delivery, program outcomes, and program cost and efficiency. Conceptually, these five program issues have a hierarchical relationship in the sense that questions about program cost and efficiency cannot be addressed unless questions about program outcomes are answered first. Similarly, questions about program outcomes depend on answers to the program operations and service delivery (i.e., program implementation), and so on and forth (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). Such a hierarchical relationship provides a

conceptual framework for recognizing the logical priorities among program issues and helps evaluators to prioritize evaluation questions, which in turn, guides the evaluation design and methodological choices.

This paper focuses on the hierarchical relationship between program implementation and program impact, because understanding their hierarchical relationship is important for a variety of reasons. First, examining program implementation helps to gauge the validity of the findings from an impact evaluation (Duerden & Witt, 2012). Suppose an impact evaluation found no significant effect of a program on its intended outcomes. Without information on program implementation, we would be unable to conclude definitively whether the program did not work because the program was not implemented, or whether the program was poorly conceptualized and hence has no chance have an impact. Carol Weiss (1997) regarded this important distinction as program failure (i.e., program theory and/or conceptualization failure) versus program implementation failure and argued for the importance in teasing out which is which. In order to do so, an evaluation must make an effort at examining program implementation issues.

Secondly, failure to attend to the logical priority of program implementation over impact could lead to asking premature evaluation questions and using evaluation designs that are not cost-effective. For instance, the U.S. NCLB (No Child Left Behind) legislation authorized under the Bush Administration calls for evidence-based practice. This call has led to a preference for

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impact-oriented evaluation that privileges experimental or quasi-experimental designs focusing exclusively on program outcomes. While questions regarding program impact are important, what is troubling is the neglect of questions regarding program implementation issues *before* asking questions about program outcomes. As a result, we learn relatively little about a program or policy other than on average whether the program or policy worked or not. Scriven (1991) refers to the types of evaluation whose benefits (e.g., information gathered as a result of the evaluation) exceeds the costs of conducting the evaluation as cost free evaluation. Using Scriven's concept, we could consider evaluations that do not tend to the proper hierarchy of the program issues as costly efforts that are likely to yield little benefits (i.e., not cost free).

Finally, evaluations that do not ask questions about program implementation issues advance little our understanding of what makes a program or policy work, or when it does not, why not. Knowledge gained from understanding program implementation serves as a basis for scaling up or replicating best practices, as Tyler (1991) emphasized that program specifics or activities do not replicate themselves, but program principles do. Therefore, understanding how and why a program works is important.

Through a mixed-methods evaluation, this paper reveals the importance of attending to the context and implementation of a program when designing an evaluation, as opposed to approaching an evaluation purely from a research design perspective that focuses on impact only. In the sections that follow, the evaluation context will be introduced first, including the background information on the program, the conceptual framework and the questions that guided the evaluation effort. Then the paper describes various aspects of the methods, followed by the presentation of key findings. After that, the paper discusses lessons learned and concludes.

1. Evaluation context

The evaluation described in this paper examined the effectiveness of an early elementary school language intervention program initiated in one of the largest urban school districts in the United States. The program impact was measured by multiple outcome indicators and focused on second and third grade students.

2. The program and its theory of action

The program serves standard English¹ language learners, primarily consisting of African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native Americans, and Hawaii American students. The primary goal of the program is to empower these students to learn to use standard English proficiently, and in the process experience increased literacy acquisition and greater academic achievement. The program's theory of action is that by providing teachers with professional development and training workshops, teachers will have productive beliefs in and attitudes towards students' language heritage, be aware of the program goals, and develop knowledge of and skills implementing instructional strategies that the program focuses on such as linguistic contrastive analysis (LCA). Equipped with awareness of program goals and knowledge and skills, teachers will then implement instructional strategies the program promotes, which in turn, will have a positive impact on students' learning outcomes.

3. Evaluation framework and questions

Based on the program's theory of action, the following conceptual model was developed to guide the evaluation effort (see Fig. 1). One point worth mentioning is that the evaluation conceptual model does not imply a straightforward relationship between program implementation and impact (i.e., teachers participating in PD → teachers gaining knowledge and skills → teachers applying knowledge and skills in classroom teaching and learning → students improving their academic outcomes). Rather, the conceptual model attempts to depict more than one pathway that the program's theory of action (or hypothesis) about how the program could impact students' learning outcomes (e.g., teachers' beliefs and attitudes could have a direct impact on student achievement), but teachers' beliefs could also influence student achievement through an indirect path. For instance, teachers who had positive attitudes and beliefs would implement program strategies, which in turn, would promote students' learning outcomes (see Fig. 1).

The evaluation of program implementation focused on teachers' participation in various professional development (PD) activities, the application of key instructional strategies in program classrooms, and the relationships among teachers' PD participations, teachers' implementation of instructional strategies, teachers' beliefs in and attitudes toward African American Language (AAL),² teachers' awareness of program goals, and teachers' understanding of one of the key instructional strategies – linguistic contrastive analysis (LCA).

The impact evaluation focused on students' achievement and the relationship between student achievement and various program implementation variables (i.e., process outcomes) including teachers' beliefs in and attitudes towards AAL and applications of key instructional strategies.

Specifically, the evaluation attempted to address the questions listed in Table 1.

4. Method

4.1. Sampling procedure and samples

A total of 61 second and third grade teachers, randomly selected from 29 schools with similar demographic and academic characteristics (e.g., ethnic composition of student population, percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, and school Academic Performance Index), participated in the evaluation. The 29 schools consisted of 23 program schools and 6 comparison schools. The total numbers of program and comparison teachers were 41 and 20 respectively. Among the 61 teachers, 21 were African American, while the rest of the teachers were mainly Hispanic and White. Forty-four of the teachers were female and 17 were male. The average years of teaching experience of the sample were about 10, whereas the average number of years that teachers have been in the program was a little more than three.

The students enrolled in these sample classrooms numbered 1023. Of these students, 47.3% were second graders and 52.7% were third graders. The percentages of boys and girls in the sample were roughly even: 51.3% and 48.7% respectively. African American students constituted a little less than half of the sample (48.4%), the rest mainly being Hispanic students. Almost all of the students were participants of free or reduced lunch (96.7%) and Title I programs (95.3%). Most students (73.9%) were English Language Learners (ELL).

¹ Standard English and Mainstream American English are used interchangeably in this paper.

² African American Language (AAL) and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) are used interchangeably in this paper.

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