

## CHAPTER

# 5

# EVALUATION OF A COMMUNITY-BASED MENTOR PROGRAM

## *A Need for Participatory Evaluation*

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this case study you should be able to

1. Define participatory evaluation and give several examples of how this theory can be applied in practice
2. Describe some of the challenges an external evaluator may face when trying to integrate elements of a participatory approach into an existing evaluation
3. Describe how a participatory approach can assist an external evaluator in improving an evaluation's cultural validity

### THE EVALUATOR

Evaluator Stephanie Brothers worked for FCA Consulting, a private evaluation firm in the Midwest. Before starting to work at FCA, Stephanie had earned a master's in educational research and had taken several program evaluation courses as electives. One that Stephanie found particularly interesting was a course on **evaluation program theory**. It provided an overview of the various data collection methods and the principles that would guide an evaluator practicing that theory. This course provided

#### **evaluation program theory**

A systematic method of collecting, analyzing, and reporting information to determine the worth of a set of activities

### participatory evaluation model

An evaluation approach whereby those who are being served by the program play a dominant role in shaping the evaluation, its objectives, data collection tools, and reporting of results

Stephanie with some alternative approaches to conducting evaluations, particularly approaches that focused on more of a **participatory evaluation model**. This evaluation theory focuses on stakeholders' or groups' developing and collecting their own data and presenting their own findings for the evaluation.

After receiving her master's in educational psychology, Stephanie had applied to private evaluation firms around the country and gone on several interviews. All of her interviewers had been very impressed with the amount of course work she had taken geared specifically toward program evaluation—so much so that two firms had immediately offered her a position.

In her new job at FCA, as Stephanie got to know the people in the firm, she was surprised by their various educational backgrounds and former work experiences. She had assumed that everyone working in a program evaluation firm would have a degree in program evaluation. Several coworkers had advanced degrees in such fields as psychology, social work, political science, communication, and technology, and a few were former attorneys, teachers, and school administrators. Although at first Stephanie had been a little concerned that her fellow coworkers did not have the program evaluation background that she had, when working in a team with them she soon realized that they brought to the table a variety of perspectives and experiences from the field of education and their own work.

Working as a middle-level evaluator for FCA gave Stephanie solid evaluation experience that complemented her technical training. In September the company took on a new client: a community-based mentor program for high school students. This program was funded through a three-year grant from the state's department of education and was beginning its second year. Things had not gone well in the first year of the project, however. The project director had partnered with an external evaluator because a rigorous evaluation component that gathered both formative and summative data was required. However, at the end of the first year the program evaluator had failed to collect any data on the project and was unable to submit a summative report to show whether the project was meeting its intended goals and objectives. Not filing a project report annually put the project's funding in serious jeopardy. Following this, the program evaluator resigned, and the project director hired FCA to take over the evaluation for the next two years.

For the project, Stephanie was informed that she would serve as principal evaluator and oversee a team of three other employees. Because this was an educational program, team members who had educational backgrounds were chosen. One member of the team had been a school administrator for thirty years, and the other two were trained researchers. Stephanie still could not help but feel a little apprehensive about working with a team whose members were not all formally trained in program evaluation, but she had confidence in herself and felt deep down that they would be able to do a high-quality job. She also realized how important the evaluation would be, and she was eager to work with the community-based organization.

## THE PROGRAM

The purpose of the community-based mentor program was to link volunteers with at-risk high school students. Although the community was considered a small city, it had many of the problems associated with much larger metropolitan areas: many students in the public school district seeking free or reduced-price lunch, high transience rates among families, high dropout rates among high school students, a large number of school suspensions, and drug trafficking. In addition, a substantial portion of the school population was not meeting state benchmarks on the state standardized measures, placing the district on the Schools in Need of Improvement list.

The goal of the program was to provide a structured after-school environment for at-risk high school students through one-to-one mentoring. Mentors were volunteers from the community coming from a wide variety of backgrounds, occupations, and education levels. Each mentor worked with one student. Mentors had their choice of working with their mentee at the high school facility after school or at other locations. Many mentors, particularly those who were retired, chose to have their mentee come to their home. Mentors were required to meet with their mentee at least three times a week for at least one hour per meeting. In some cases, especially for those mentors who were busy professionals and had a family of their own, mentoring took place on weekends.

Although the specifics of the program, such as the number and duration of mentor-mentee meetings, were explicitly stated

in the program description, Stephanie noticed when she reviewed the program documents that other aspects of the program, such as the types and quality of the activities mentors should be doing with students, were not specified. It appeared that mentors could pretty much do whatever activities they wanted with the student they were working with.

## THE EVALUATION PLAN

### **mixed-methods approach**

A data collection model that incorporates the use of both quantitative and qualitative data

### **evaluation capacity**

The development of evaluation data collection tools and materials

The evaluation team decided that a **mixed-methods approach** would be best. The mixed-methods approach is a methodology used in research and also in program evaluation, whereby the evaluators collect both quantitative and qualitative data from program participants. Box 5.1 presents the complete list of program goals; the evaluators would determine whether these goals were being met.

Shortly after their examination of all project documents and materials, Stephanie and the evaluation team had another meeting. They invited Jonathan Post, the head of the community organization that the school district had partnered with for the mentor program. The evaluators had decided that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the project and the need to develop evaluation tools for data collection. Developing such tools is often referred as establishing **evaluation capacity** (see Box 5.2). In

### **BOX 5.1. Program Goals**

1. To provide each eligible student with access to a community mentor
2. To work with mentors and provide them with quality training
3. To increase students' academic achievement in school
4. To decrease incidents of student violence and behavioral problems at school and in the community
5. To increase the number of at-risk students graduating from high school

## BOX 5.2. What Is Evaluation Capacity?

*Evaluation capacity* is a term commonly used in evaluation. Although it has come to mean many different things to many different people, typically it is used by evaluators to describe the development of the different tools needed to collect data. It is not uncommon for evaluators to use what are referred to as preestablished tools or instruments. Preestablished instruments typically have been developed by someone other than the researcher or evaluator. Another characteristic common among preestablished instruments is that they tend to be standardized. A standardized instrument possesses the following criteria:

It includes a fixed set of questions or stimuli.

It is given in a fixed time frame under similar conditions with a fixed set of instructions and identified responses.

It is created to measure specific outcomes and is subjected to extensive research and development and review.

And performance on the instrument can be compared to a referent such as a norm group, a standard or criterion, or an individual's own performance [on a norm reference test, a criterion reference test, or a self-referenced test].  
(Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2006, p. 67)

In most cases, preestablished measures have received extensive testing for reliability and validation during their design and development phases, prior to being marketed and disseminated. Most preestablished measures used in education are developed for use by professionals other than educational researchers or program evaluators. They are used by school administrators, general and special education teachers, school psychologists and counselors, and the like. For many projects, however, these tools, the data collected by evaluators, or both may be used to address various evaluation objectives.

**TABLE 5.1. Evaluation Matrix for the Mentor Program**

Evaluation Objectives	Stakeholder Group	Tools, Instruments, or Types of Data	Timeline and Design for Data Collection	Formative or Summative Data	Status

addition, whether or not the program could be delivered with fidelity also had to be considered.

Before they met with Jonathan, Stephanie sat down with her team and, using an evaluation matrix, planned some of the activities. Presented in Table 5.1 is the matrix she and Jonathan used.

Through both her course work and her on-the-job training experience, Stephanie had learned that a thorough evaluation plan can be very helpful for both the evaluator and the client. As the team began to lay out the evaluation activities, Stephanie soon realized that not all of her team members believed as much as she did that such detailed planning of the evaluation—including which data would be collected when—was important. In fact, one member said, “We are wasting a lot of precious time laying out every detail of this evaluation; we should be out there collecting data—that’s what evaluation is all about.” Stephanie said she agreed with her team member that evaluation was about collecting data and that they would soon be doing so; but they also had to realize that this plan not only was for them but also would serve as a tool or set of talking points to open up a dialogue with their client.

Grudgingly, her teammates agreed.

On the day of the meeting Jonathan arrived on time, and so did Stephanie’s team. After the introductions, Stephanie began by handing out the latest draft of the evaluation matrix to everyone,

saying that the team had reviewed the project and come up with a plan.

“Our next step,” Stephanie added, “will be to start to develop our instruments and tools for collecting data. We call this *building evaluation capacity*.”

“Tools,” said Jonathan, wrinkling his forehead.

Stephanie knew that often evaluators used language or terms that were unfamiliar to clients. “Surveys, interview protocols—these are tools that evaluators use to collect data,” she explained. She pulled a couple of surveys from a previous project and laid them out on the table in front of Jonathan.

Jonathan put on his reading glasses and examined the documents. Then he reached into his briefcase, pulled out a stack of papers, and handed them to Stephanie.

“And what is this?” she asked.

“Survey data that we have collected from all the mentors, the students they are working with, and their family members or guardians,” said Jonathan.

“Oh.” Stephanie felt her face begin to contort as she flipped through the papers.

“We decided to collect some of the data ourselves to make it easier on whoever stepped in to do the evaluation,” said Jonathan.

Stephanie handed the surveys to the other members of the team, who began to rifle through them. “That’s great. I am sure that we can put these to good use.”

For the rest of their time together, Stephanie went through the remainder of the evaluation plan and explained it to Jonathan. She told him their evaluation team would be setting up a **focus group** of mentors to interview. She explained that a focus group is a smaller sample of people, often with similar experiences, who are interviewed in a group setting. She further explained that to ensure that all the program goals were properly addressed, the evaluation team would also be collecting data from the students’ schools. She noted that the team would work to get school district permission to obtain access to this sensitive data.

At meeting’s end, Jonathan thanked them for working with the program and said he looked forward to it. The team thanked him for coming, and Stephanie saw him out.

After closing the door, Stephanie turned to the other members of her team.

**focus group**

A data collection approach similar to one-to-one interviews, except with a small number of people participating together

One of them said, “We can’t possibly use those surveys and data. Did you look at them? The scales they used make absolutely no sense whatsoever, and the items have nothing to do with evaluating the project’s goals and objectives.”

“I agree,” said another member.

“Circular file,” said the third. She pointed to the trash can in the far corner of the room. “Data should only be collected by professional researchers who know what they are doing.”

Stephanie could feel her stomach tensing up. “I agree, but what am I supposed to tell Jonathan?”

“Tell him the truth,” said one of the former administrators. “Tell him the data isn’t valid or rigorously collected, and we can’t use it.”

Stephanie joined the others at the conference table and slumped back into her chair. It was true. The data had minimal if any value. And Stephanie knew they had little use for the data in their evaluation plan. But she also knew that not using it could spell potential disaster for an evaluation project that had already gotten off to a shaky start.

Stephanie opened the folder of completed surveys and started to sort through them again. *Is there anything we can use?* she asked herself. *Anything at all?*

Considering the bad experience the client and the participating mentors had had with the previous evaluator and the potential harm to the program that the past evaluator’s actions might have caused, Stephanie realized that building trust was very important. She convinced the members of her team to use the data collected by the client in their evaluation report. They noted in the report that the survey and data were collected by the participants. Seeing these used in the report and presented at a later meeting built great confidence and trust. The mentors felt that the evaluators were interested in what they had to say about the program. They also realized that their survey didn’t exactly address some of the questions or objectives of the evaluation. Recognizing this, Jonathan worked with Stephanie and her team to develop a more rigorous survey, specifically designed to address some of the project’s evaluation objectives and the mentors’ needs and questions. The mentors now trusted the evaluation team, and the next time around they allowed the team to collect the data.



## SUMMARY OF EVALUATION ACTIVITIES AND FINDINGS

The evaluator not only used the evaluation matrix to help guide the data collection efforts but also incorporated the needs and perceptions of the client. Despite her careful work, Stephanie faced a serious challenge when working with the client using a participatory evaluation approach. The data collected by the stakeholders for the community-based mentor program was not as valid or reliable as the evaluation team had hoped. Recognizing this, Stephanie, the lead evaluator on the team, had to carefully show team members that it was necessary to keep the program's stakeholders involved in the data collection and evaluation process so that the final results of their evaluation report would be used for programmatic refinement. At the same time, she had to convey to the client that further, more valid data needed to be collected, despite all the effort and work that had occurred thus far on the project.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

In this case study, Stephanie's past course experience provided her with a perception of program evaluation that was slightly different than that of her colleagues. Despite the fact that the data collected by the client might not have had the rigor that data collected from the evaluators would have had, Stephanie was able to recognize the importance of using the data for the evaluation report. By including the data collected by the client, the evaluation team was able to begin to develop a sense of trust with the client that had been fractured because of past experiences.

## KEY CONCEPTS

- Evaluation capacity
- Evaluation program theory
- Focus group
- Mixed-methods approach
- Participatory evaluation model

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As a professional evaluator, you will probably find yourself working with people who have very different backgrounds. One of the wonderful things about program evaluation is that it attracts a wide range of professionals. Take a few minutes to list some of the advantages (and perhaps some disadvantages) you can think of to working on an evaluation team composed of people with such varied experiences. What skills, talents, and past experiences would you be able to bring to the project, and how might you establish an evaluation framework that would work to incorporate both your skills and the skills of members of your team?
2. Unlike what is required for teachers, administrators, school counselors, and school psychologists, there is no official certification by the state or federal government for program evaluators. In essence, anyone can call himself or herself a program evaluator and practice this craft. Do you think there should be a certification process for program evaluators? Why or why not? Note your position and list a few comments that support your beliefs on the subject for a class discussion.
3. Read the Altschuld (1999) article in the “Suggested Reading” section that pertains specifically to certification for program evaluators. After reading them, reflect on this article. Did anything in them change your opinion about the issues? If so, please be prepared to discuss why in class.
4. What ethical challenges do you think Stephanie and the other evaluators in this case had to address? If you were one of the evaluators, how would you have addressed the ethical issues that you identified?

## CLASS ACTIVITIES

1. Conduct a literature search on participatory evaluation. You may also want to read the items in the “Suggested Reading” section that pertain to this. Based on your reading, what should Stephanie have done with the data that the client had collected?

2. It is never too early to start preparing for the interview process. Whether you have already had a job interview for a program evaluation position or not, make a list of the different things you might bring to an interview. These might include, for example, past experiences in which you performed job-related activities (such as data entry) that might be valuable to an employer.
3. Surf the Web to “visit” several different colleges and universities and review the various courses that make up their program evaluation degrees.
4. Surf the Web and look at newspapers and other media to find program evaluation positions. Keep a running list of the different skills that these positions require. Have a discussion in class about where evaluators-in-training obtain these particular skills.

## SUGGESTED READING

- Altschuld, J. W. (1999). The case for a voluntary system for credentialing evaluators. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 20, 507–517.
- Chaudary, I. A., & Imran, S. (2012). Exploring action research as an approach to interactive (participatory) evaluation.
- Cousins, J. B., & Whitmore, E. (1998). Framing participatory evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 1998(80) 5–23.
- O’Sullivan, R. O. (2012). Collaborative evaluation within a framework of stakeholder-oriented evaluation approaches. *Evaluation Program Planning*, 35, 518–522.