Creating a Link Between Preschool Program Evaluation and Decision Making: A Case in Point

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes issues surrounding the nonimpact of findings resulting from a formative, responsive evaluation of a university-based child care program. Several sources of problems are identified, with guidelines provided for designing an evaluation project to increase the likelihood of effecting program change.

An issue of persistent concern in evaluative research has been the extent to which findings are utilized (Brickell, 1976; Cochran, 1978; Cook, 1978; Cox, 1977; Davis and Salasin, 1977; House, 1973; Leviton and Hughes, 1981; Locatis, Smith, and Blake, 1980; Rossi and Wright, 1977; Young and Comtois, 1979). Wise (1978, p. 1) has summarized the problem this way:

Evaluation has for some time been defined as a process of gathering and analyzing information for decision makers. The problem seems to be that the decision makers do not read or use the information provided, or use it toward purposes that the evaluator does not feel are legitimate. As portrayed, this problem strikes at the heart of evaluation as a field of professional service. What does a field do when its defining purpose, its reason for being, is, to use the political vernacular, inoperative?

In order to facilitate the decision-making process, Stake (1975) has suggested a number of steps for conducting a responsive evaluation. According to Stake, an evaluator should collect information that has a direct bearing on issues or concerns raised by audiences themselves. After this evidence is collected and analyzed, the evaluator considers, in detail, what form the evaluation report is to take; the format of reporting is fitted carefully to audience needs. Reports may take the form of round-table discussions, films, exhibits, or whatever is deemed appropriate. Very importantly, the evaluator is instructed to provide “faithful representations,” communicating “in natural ways” as much direct personal experience as possible (Guba and Lincoln, 1981, p. 26). Reports are, then, presented to the audiences involved, with the
evaluator interpreting the data and helping to identify areas of discrepancy that represent concern.

This essay addresses several issues surrounding the nonimpact of findings resulting from a formative, responsive evaluation of a university-based preschool program, using Stake’s (1975) model. The discussion identifies several sources of problems and provides guidelines for designing a formative evaluation project to increase the likelihood of effecting program change. Program change is likely to occur under the following two conditions: first, when teachers are trained to generate relevant, alternative teaching strategies in the face of a decision situation; and, second, when the evaluator acts as a change agent to facilitate constructive innovation.

The Case Material

The case study will be described very briefly. At the start of the school year, the administration of the Children’s Center decided to combine their two separate preschool programs. They brought all of the children, materials, and teaching staff together into their two large classrooms. The new integrated learning program was designed for both day care and nursery school children.

Throughout the course of the school day, the children were allowed to move around freely from area to area to find activities to meet their interests. However, a serious problem arose when the teachers discovered that they were unable to keep track of how the children were spending their time. This concern formed the basis of a formative evaluation study, using Stake’s (1975) responsive model. The day care children were observed during free play for a period of five school days. The evaluator portrayed the descriptive data in the form of graphic representations that revealed how the day care children spent their time (by content categories); with whom they spent their time (the participants in the interactions); and where they spent their time (the activity areas). Graphs were compiled for the children both individually and as a group.

The program director and teachers considered the evaluative information to be generally useful. One of the teachers described her reactions this way: “It made things clearer to me. I could look around the room and see some things, but I wasn’t quite sure how to put it and the report . . . put it . . . in much clearer terms for me.”

Another teacher responded by saying that the children were not getting involved in pre-reading, writing, language, and science activities as much as she would like: