

IMPROVING TITLE I TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE:
AN EVALUATION UTILIZATION PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction*

Evaluation utilization is one of those areas which has assumed increasing importance in directing evaluation improvements. This is particularly true in Title I evaluations, in which the TIERS reporting system is intended to provide heightened evaluation utilization at several different governmental levels--local, state, federal. Further evidence of this attention to evaluation utilization in Title I is to be found in the new "user oriented evaluation workshop materials" currently under development, which have as their focus the increased utilization of evaluation findings. However, exploring the research on evaluation utilization before settling on "utilization" as an appropriate guiding mechanism, we find that the literature presents a dizzying array of claims and counter-claims about the extent and nature of utilization, none of which provides much advice either for the conduct of Title I evaluation or as to the nature of appropriate technical assistance on the conduct of evaluations.

Evaluation Utilization Research: Restricted Definition

What do we know about evaluation utilization--particularly at the local school level? For purposes of this discussion, I will restrict my attention to issues pertaining to utilization of discrete evaluation findings such as evaluation final report or end-of-year Test results. This kind of definition seems to be in keeping with the nature of current Title I requirements. My own early research on evaluation

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utilization assumed this kind of restricted definition of "utilization." My students and I conducted a study of evaluation and decision making in Title VII programs in local school districts (Alkin, Kosecoff, Fitz-Gibbon, and Seligman; 1974). We did not find strong evidence that the summative evaluation findings had much impact upon local decision making. This was not a particularly surprising finding since it squared with the findings in evaluation literature at that time. The study, however, did provide some research validation of the lack of utilization of report findings at the local school level.

In preparing this paper, I again came across the Jane David research report (1978) on the local uses of Title I evaluations. Stated quite simply, local school respondents in the David study viewed Title I evaluation requirements as "a set of procedures to provide one's superiors information on which to judge the program on the basis of criteria defined by those superiors." Hence, the respondents viewed evaluation as "more likely to be associated with accountability than to be regarded as a potential source of useful information" (David; 1978, VII).

In schools, Title I evaluation data is viewed as a set of data requirements, externally imposed from the federal and state levels and the typical practitioner's response is simply to fulfill the minimum letter of the law related to those requirements as expeditiously as possible. This kind of response was present in the evaluation reports of many districts and was confirmed in the results of my Title II study (Alkin, et al.; 1974).

Local Schools as Utilizers

Perhaps it is appropriate to step back and view education at the local level in order to understand more fully why schools and school districts do not utilize evaluation reports and test data to a greater extent. Karl Weick (1976) has referred to local education organizations as "loosely coupled systems." That is, they do not always function in what seems to be a highly systematic and co-ordinated way. A description by Farrar, DeSanctis, and Cohen (1979) perhaps captures best the dilemma of external programs implemented in local school systems.

The organization of federal programs in local settings does not seem like a precision drill-team marching in order toward formal goals, or even orderly bi-lateral negotiation. Instead, it seems more like a large lawn party: all the guests are likely to have somewhat different ideas about what, if anything, they want the party to be, and what they want to get from it. Often, in fact, they don't know what they want until they arrive or leave--and sometimes they never know.

And, to pursue the analogy, suppose the host at this garden party should insist that each of the guests periodically rate the quality of the party, or the drinks, or the food, etc.--it cannot really be expected to have much impact. This somewhat peculiar, externally imposed requirement will be tolerated as part of the "price of admission," so to speak, but it will not really change the behavior of individuals.

It seems to me that attempting to increase the utilization of externally determined evaluation information is entirely the wrong approach, that formulating the problem as "how can we increase the use of Title I evaluation data?" may, in fact, confuse the issue. I do not believe that we ought to seek to increase the utilization of Title I

evaluations. Instead, I want to see evaluations improved so that they are more likely to be used, and thereby increase the impact of evaluation data on informed actions within the schools.

An example comes readily to mind. Recently, a federal funding agency called on me to review a proposal for increasing the use of information available from a statewide data bank. The proposers emphasized the enormous range of data available, the meticulous manner in which it had been collected, and the kinds of analysis which had been, or might be, performed. "But," they moaned, "hardly anyone uses the data bank." Government agencies statewide simply were not making "adequate use" of this resource. More needed to be done, they said, to persuade state and local officials to use the evaluation data available. Something had to be done about packaging the data so that it would be more easily understood by the people in the field. More important, everyone concerned had to learn what one could do with the available information. The data bank would be more widely used, said the proposers, if we ran workshops throughout the state, and developed other procedures to make information more readily available and understood. In essence, they hypothesized that evaluation information was not used because potential users did not fully understand its relevance and importance.

Alternatively, I hypothesized that the evaluation information might not have been used because it was not relevant to the needs of governmental agencies. Therefore, adopting the data bankers' point of view and "educating those conscientious but simple folk in the field" would

not necessarily increase use. Rather, it might be hypothesized that evaluation use would increase only when the data bank provided information more highly desired, and with greater perceived relevance to, potential state, county, and local users. The moral, here, is that while the easiest strategy is to call for increased dissemination and training activities, the surest step is to assess the potential utilization deficiencies in the evaluation system itself.

Evaluation Utilization Research: A Broader Definition

Before I proceed further, let me turn back to the research on evaluation utilization to see what further insights are provided. I have noted that the main body of literature in evaluation is replete with abundant testimonials and some empirical evidence of failure to utilize evaluation results. However, from among these continuing claims of non-utilization, there now seems to be emerging new evidence which points to instances in which evaluation information is, in fact, used. Moreover, these new results are not really contradictory with prior data on utilization; the evidence of utilization now rests upon a broader definition of utilization and different categories of evaluation information.

Carol Weiss's early writings (1972) stirred the profession's interest in the study of utilization, and forced us all to begin thinking more carefully about what we meant by "utilization." More recently, Michael Patton's research (1975) has helped focus attention on a broader conception of evaluation utilization--one which focused on the actions and involvements of individual evaluators interacting with designated

users. Moreover, these interactions called to attention the gradual and subtle impact of evaluation--not necessarily on major decisions but on slowly modifying attitudes and providing input for day-to-day program operations. Simply stated, utilization is not to be found in the application of externally devised evaluation standards but in the quest for data related to real concerns and interests of project administrators.

This broadened conception of evaluation utilization was evident also in my recent studies where my colleagues and I found a wide array of instances of evaluation utilization. And where such instances were evident, what was usually present was a user-oriented evaluator identifying, developing and nurturing an interest in evaluation with a small, finite set of local users. And furthermore, in instances in which utilization took place, a mechanism existed for on-going information dialogue (in place of one-time evaluation reporting) focused on questions of local concern.

These findings and their implications for providing evaluation technical assistance to local agencies are, perhaps, presaged by the final summary statement in Jane David's report (1978): "technical assistance must be redesigned to communicate a new view of the role of evaluation, and to develop skills such as generating one's own evaluation questions. As long as technical assistance is defined narrowly as a way of telling local staff how to improve the quality of their data, it will not increase local use of evaluations" (David; 1978, p. IX).

Speculations on Evaluation Technical Assistance in Title I

Speculating about potential areas of technical assistance based upon my understanding of evaluation utilization, I would suggest first, not spending an undue amount of time teaching local district personnel to implement the Title I models, the TIERS system and all the rest. In my opinion, this data is not likely to be used to any great extent at the local level for decision making purposes and certainly not for program modifications.

To the extent that this information is necessary in order to have sound evaluation information for use at the federal level, it may be appropriate to engage technical assistance to teach people to collect the data. In fact, Robert Linn (1979) has suggested the use of alternative evaluation paradigms which would only require obtaining outcome data from a sample of school programs. It seems to me that providing instruction in order to have valid data at the federal level and presuming to provide instruction (or technical assistance) so that evaluation will have local impact are distinctly different topics.

Second, I suggest focusing on evaluation as a process. As I have mentioned, my previous research shows that evaluation can have greater impact when evaluators: 1) work closely with a small group of users; and, 2) engage in dialogue with a carefully delineated and finite audience. Reports may be published, widely disseminated and, I hope, read by a diverse audience, but evaluation as a process is dependent upon personal interactions. Personal interactions are

fostered by information dialogue, not information reporting (albeit readable, and timely) but by on-going interactive communication sensitive to locally relevant questions. This focus on evaluation as a process is quite different from the usual focus on evaluation as a report. The implication in most federal programs is that evaluation means producing a written report or set of data describing the end of the year outcomes of a program.

Next, it seems to me that there is very little in the current ~~Title I operational procedures which encourages local educational~~ agencies to focus on evaluation directed to uniquely determined local needs and evaluation questions. Indeed, the current preoccupation with the TIERS system provides educators with just the opposite signals. Thus, it seems entirely appropriate at this time to encourage educators to focus on "generating one's own evaluation questions" as Jane David has said. Title I policy must not only condone such actions, but must provide incentives as well.

Specific Training Implications

The focus of evaluation training must be shifted from "how can we use existing evaluation information in local decision making?" to "how can we gather evaluation information specifically relevant to locally determined concerns?" This change in orientation will require a great deal of desensitizing of local program officials who have come to believe that evaluation is a formal set of requirements imposed from outside the system.

It is naive to think of homogeneous fixed Title I programs

operating in school districts since there are a series of highly idiosyncratic program elements housed under a Title I umbrella. Picturing the school Title I program as such a non-static complex system implies the need for a different kind of evaluation. Such a system must be focused on clarifying local program operations, helping school personnel to understand the program they have implemented and the possibilities for change.

An on-going evaluation feedback system must, of necessity, deal with some seemingly pedestrian aspects of program operation; information needed locally is frequently quite mundane. In answering local evaluation questions, a broader range of information types become acceptable, simply because they are the best data available-- anecdotal data, literature search, interview data, surveys, observation data, etc. In short, guidelines must emphasize the imperfections of data collection in the field (indeed, they must stress accommodation of these imperfections) while encouraging the most systematic data collection possible.

Finally, the technical assistance training must begin to focus on the evaluation process and on developing modes of evaluator-user interaction and dialogue. A focus on evaluation process requires the training of evaluators who, above all, have a sense of commitment to user-oriented evaluation--to the facilitation of program improvement. The development of evaluator attitudes towards service and the skills of productive interaction are perhaps, together, a ten year TAC training agenda.

I trust that these unholy views of Title I evaluation will encourage further discussion. I hope that greater attention to the evaluation utilization implications of Title I evaluation will lead to major changes in the provision of technical assistance.

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