

Leading empowered evaluations to develop trust and improve learning: Insights from qualitative research



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Dr Kerrie Ikin, FACE, is a highly experienced educator, with over 35 years' experience at all levels within the New South Wales Department of Education. Kerrie is the director of Drummoyne Services in Education, providing consultancy services in leadership, organisational development and evaluation to school principals and leadership teams. Kerrie is an Adjunct Senior Lecturer in the University of New England Business School, conducting research in values-based leadership and evaluation with her colleague Dr Peter McClenaghan. Kerrie's strengths and research interests are in instructional leadership development, empowerment evaluation, evaluation capacity building and organisational development from a values- and trust-based lens.

As a result of her development of a new process that empowered leaders to evaluate their own schools and build staff and community capacity in evaluation processes, Kerrie was given the Award for Excellence in Evaluation by the Australasian Evaluation Society in 2008. In 2016, she was awarded a Fellowship of the Australian College of Educators.

Abstract

What does 'empowering teachers-as-evaluators' mean in whole-school strategic planning and evaluation? Our work seeks to develop and empower teachers as whole-of-school evaluators to embrace ownership of the school's plan and directions; build communities of practice; create transparency, openness and trust; and ultimately improve student learning outcomes.

Our previous research in whole-school qualitative empowerment evaluation showed that principals who were fully engaged in their schools' evaluations were more likely to be influenced by the evaluation process, use the evaluation results and build evaluation capacity than those who merely participated as guests. These engaged principals were performing double-loop learning. We further found that key values, such as trust, acted as catalysts for evaluation influence. This raised questions as to whether the influences on principals from this research would also apply to all staff if they were similarly engaged in their whole school's evaluation.

We describe one school's ongoing journey since 2015 in such a process along with our research findings to date. Our findings draw on observation, interviews and questionnaire data from all staff at all levels in the school. The research reveals that as staff members develop transparency and trust in the process and with each other, their understanding of and input into the school's plan and directions increases and their evaluation capacity is built.

Background

Since 2015, all New South Wales government schools have been required to have developed a three-year strategic plan in consultation with their staff, students and community. Each plan needs to comprise three strategic directions, showing the purpose of each direction; an overall outcome for the people involved; the processes to be used to achieve the direction; the products and practices that will ensue; and the quantifiable improvement gains and data (usually quantitative) that will be used to evaluate the direction. The introduction of this new planning model marked the beginning of a new era for New South Wales government schools in relation to school accountability and improvement. The new model dispenses with the system for reviewing schools by exception (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2004), whereby a team led by a senior departmental officer reviewed a school only if data indicated a concern. It introduces an integrated school self-evaluation, planning and evaluation process. The school plan is endorsed (as developed and completed in accordance with policy) by the principal's supervisor, while ultimate responsibility for the plan, its execution and its evaluation rests with the principal. In addition, a small team of principal peers assess the school's plan and achievements through an external school validation process.

This new model presumes a high level of competence in collaborative strategic planning and evaluation as well as a high level of evaluation capacity by school principals and staff. Anecdotal evidence provides little support for this presumption. School evaluation research over the last 20 years has tended to focus on comparisons of the merits of internal self-evaluation and external reviews (Mutch, 2012), and the literature on empowerment evaluation (EE) in schools has tended to focus on teachers as evaluators of their students' performance (Clinton & Hattie, 2015; Fetterman, 2015). Although these studies—as well as the broader literature on strategic planning (Robbins, Bergman, Stagg, & Coulter, 2015), EE (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 2015) and evaluation capacity-building (Compton, Baizerman, & Stockdill, 2002)—have provided valuable information about the topic in general, the depth of information about the experiences of school staff actively participating in EE has been limited. We could not identify published studies specifically using teachers engaged in whole-school planning and evaluation as participants.

Therefore, in conjunction with the EE project already underway, we embarked on a long-term qualitative research case study designed to add valuable insights to the current body of school evaluation research by providing an in-depth look at the experiences of staff members from one government primary school in New South Wales who are currently participating in an EE of

their school's strategic plan. The aim of this study is to create knowledge about teachers-as-evaluators at two levels: as individuals, and as a community of practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). This paper describes the staff's experiences and the emerging themes to date, partway through the EE project.

Setting the context for the study

The school is located in north-west Sydney, caters for over 800 students from Foundation to Year 6, and has a staff of approximately 40, many of whom work on a permanent or temporary part-time basis. In 2015, the principal contracted the authors to work as facilitators with all teaching staff and school leaders over the following three years to engage and empower them in whole-school planning and evaluation.

The project that was subsequently developed was based on three core areas of research:

1. Ikin's doctoral research (summarised in Ikin & McClenaghan, 2015), which investigated how school principals were influenced by their participation in school reviews
2. Fetterman's (2015) theories and principles of EE
3. Tschannen-Moran's (2014) empirical research on trust in schools.

The project involved staff re-examining school planning and evaluation from an empowerment and values perspective.

First, all staff worked together to define their own personal values and examine the alignment between these values and those espoused in the school's strategic plan. Second, using a values lens as their analytical framework, staff worked together to re-examine and revamp the supporting actions needed to achieve the school's strategic directions. Third, through a process of prioritisation, three agreed actions were established. Working at times in one large group and at times in smaller groups, the staff then developed the parameters of these actions; the indicators that these actions were occurring; descriptions of the evidence that would be needed to demonstrate that these actions were occurring; and the ways in which this evidence needed to be collected and evaluated. The final phase (which at the time of writing this paper is still in progress) involves all staff, working in small groups, taking responsibility for evaluating one section of the school's strategic plan. The intention is that this work will be presented, discussed and finally accepted as the school's self-evaluation of its strategic plan. At every stage, comments, votes, recommendations and revisions are attributed to actual members of staff to demonstrate and build transparency, openness and trust.

The study that developed from the project is being guided by three research questions:

1. How do staff engaged in an EE of their school's strategic plan describe their experiences?
2. How does participating in an EE of their school's strategic plan change staff members personally?
3. How do staff perceive that participating in an EE of their school's strategic plan changes their community of practice?

Findings to date

While still in the early stages of data analysis, we have identified five emerging themes that capture the essence of staff's experiences and learning, from both individual and community-of-practice perspectives. We have also identified that each of the five themes is underpinned by the meta-theme of trust.

Heightened self-awareness

Staff reported that their experiences had led to a heightened level of self-awareness. All staff who participated in the initial values identification activity commented on its impact and power. As staff left the activity, they made comments such as:

- 'The school would be so different if these were the school's values.'
- 'Wow, wouldn't the school be a different place!'
- 'I'm going home to do this exercise with my husband.'

This was reinforced in recent interviews in which a number of participants, unprompted, noted how critical awareness of their values had influenced their interactions at school and how they now participate in setting school directions. One participant commented on how staff and leaders now frequently talk about values when discussing decision-making that impacts on school strategies. Another participant expressed a sort of epiphany in discovering the importance of acknowledging his vulnerability in the process:

[I've realised that if we are] to build trust and take risks, we have to voice our opinions. If you want change to happen, you have to say how you are feeling. Everyone is now starting to realise that if we are all going to trust each other, we have to show some vulnerability and put stuff out there. I am willing to be vulnerable, [and I am] starting to see a lot more of that in the staffroom.

Culture change

Staff described their initial experience with the process as being 'confronting' and 'challenging' but also 'powerful' because, as one staff member put it, 'It's

the first time we have been involved at a whole-school strategic level and required to defend our opinions in a public forum'. Consistent with Lencioni's (2002) theory of team development and trust and Senge et al.'s (2000) theories of organisational change and learning, public accountability in this form initially amplified staff members' feelings of fear, uncertainty, ambiguity and vulnerability, but it also began to develop trust.

At the same time, some staff—most notably, although not exclusively, those in temporary positions—reported initial feelings of low self-concept. Some felt that their temporary status impeded their willingness to be as open in their input as other, permanent staff members due to their fear of reprisal. Those in permanent positions reported that their honesty in the past had had negative consequences. While these staff members agreed that some of their initial inputs had been in line with the status quo, they nevertheless gained enough confidence and trust in the process and with each other over time to voice their own opinions.

Willingness to change

Lewin (as cited in Manchester et al., 2014) and Kotter (as cited in Calegari, Sibley, & Turner, 2015) argue that for successful change to occur, participants need to have a greater sense of understanding of both the purpose for the change and their own role within the process. Aligned with an emerging sense of self-awareness, observational data indicated that staff were becoming more forthright in expressing and defending their opinions and constructively engaging in the change process. The majority of the staff interviewed commented that they are now more willing to take risks in front of others; that they have noticed a positive change in the sorts of conversations in the staffroom; and that staff are much more willing to share education ideas with each other. As one staff member commented:

I do think there is a change ... People are talking and helping each other in the staffroom. I honestly feel people are more trusted. You see the interactions between people that you would not see a year ago. You see risk-taking teacher to teacher.

It should be acknowledged, however, that a small number of staff were quite adamant that these changes had not taken place. At this stage of the data collection and analysis, the reasons for this are not clear. Possible explanations include the continual staff turnover; the resistance to change based on the historical culture of the school, which had been described as 'toxic'; and the perceived lack of engagement in strategic whole-school issues. Although these staff did not perceive any changes, at no point did they suggest that they were resistant to such changes occurring.

Emerging sense-making

Staff reported a greater understanding of the school plan and how this has clarified their understanding of their roles within it. As two participants discussed:

A: Risk-taking to me meant it was almost dangerous—but I now see that what is one person's risk-taking is not another's. Coming up with a definition that everyone agreed to is a big thing. [A] definition that is made by everyone in our own context is really beneficial, because once we started to work on it we realised that it meant different things to different people. Having that commonality of what the strategic goal is—it is much more important to have a shared goal than taking on a given definition.

B: Yes, the strategic direction felt jargonistic until you [the researchers] started working with us. Now I think, 'Are we really covering that?' Before it was something that was pinned on the wall. How good would it be to come up with our goals for the next three years this way?

The realisation by many has been that the school cannot be termed a real community of practice unless it has a common and agreed set of core values. The values that have emerged and been continuously reinforced through this process have been risk-taking and trust. Although most staff noted that the process at times seemed repetitive—especially during the values definition phase—they all agreed that they now had a much clearer sense of where they were heading and why. It would appear that this realisation can best be explained by drawing on Argyris and Schön's (1978) notion of double-loop learning, which involves learning from experience as a way to change behaviours and values.

Impediments to the change process

A consistent theme has been the negative influence of the school's past history in dealing with planning and change. Staff and school leaders have continually reminded us that staff morale had been seriously undermined and that little or no trust existed prior to the current school leaders being established. Despite acknowledging that the current school leaders are acting with greater transparency and inclusiveness, staff emphasised that it takes a long time to change perceptions and behaviours that have been so negatively influenced in the past.

Two additional factors that were raised relate to the constant staff turnover and the large percentage of temporary appointments in the school. Of the three senior leaders, only one has been in the school throughout the entire process. These factors are acknowledged as being largely uncontrollable and are accepted as being inevitable in large public

organisations such as this. Nevertheless, such issues raise the question of whether the EE process alone is enough to eventually overcome such factors.

At a personal level, staff reported that fear of failure in front of school leaders and senior staff and a related, ongoing issue of lack of trust has meant that some are still uncomfortable in speaking openly or putting their name to particular points of view. A few staff commented that they had not always accurately expressed their point of view because it did not seem to be the view of the majority, although they did acknowledge that they would probably be more open now.

Finally, most staff commented on how engaging and motivating the initial sessions were, but many felt that longer time gaps between facilitated sessions in the middle of the project had led to some stagnation of motivation and a dilution of learning. Staff were once again motivated, however, as the final stage of evaluation had begun and they were once more engaging in the process on a regular basis.

Conclusion

While a full cycle of the EE process is still to be completed, some tentative conclusions have begun to emerge.

At this stage of the research, it appears that beginning with a critical analysis of personal values has been the single most important factor in developing a community of practice within the school; driving cultural change; and creating opportunities for evaluation capacity-building. Second, when staff are given a framework to engage in whole-school strategic planning and evaluation, they are capable of rising to the challenge. Third, an EE framework appears to be compatible with this strategic planning process and capable of overcoming traditional impediments to organisational change, such as cultural and structural barriers. Fourth, staff buy-in and motivation is better when there are focused and regular facilitated workshops to continually reinforce learning. Finally, as staff develop transparency, openness and trust in the process and with each other, understanding of and input into the school's plan and directions are increasing, and staff's knowledge of and skills in evaluation—although still at an early stage—are developing.

With the final stage just underway, staff are now engaging in evaluation skills development, including designing data-gathering tools, applying evaluation processes and analysing data. The gains to date, however, have already led the school leadership team to request that the same process be used from the beginning to create the school's next three-year strategic plan. Independently, staff have also asked that this approach be used again with the same expert facilitation.

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