Problems Faced by Practitioners Pertinent to Early Childhood Education Program Evaluation: A Qualitative Perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to explore and highlight the problems faced by the practitioners pertinent to early childhood education program evaluation using a qualitative paradigm. This paper is an extracted section of a larger global study that was conducted to complete the doctoral thesis requirement. The purpose of the study was to explore the problems faced by the practitioners in early childhood education program evaluation. The research questions were framed to investigate perspectives of the 20 global experts through non random snowball sampling technique. The data were collected using in depth interviews and detailed thematic analysis were conducted. Results revealed that access, permission from the government, expertise of evaluators and contextual differences are the major problems that are faced while carrying out early childhood program evaluation. In the conclusion section of this study, brief reflective analysis of the phenomenon is presented in alignment with the study findings.

Keywords: Early childhood education, evaluation, program evaluation

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Introduction

Countries in which literacy and quality education is questionable have always been struggling for reaching a point whereby accessibility and quality provision of educational services can be no less than a dream. A set of underdeveloped and developing countries became a signatory of many international agendas to ensure that country's human development index raises towards betterment. Education was made a nationwide priority with the influence of funding agencies and involvement of these agencies was implemented in project form. Different educational themes that were of crucial importance were taken into account and various programs and projects were designed to accomplish those targets, for instance, raise in literacy rates, girls' education, quality education, teacher development and early childhood development. Since the past two eras, these developmental projects have taken a rise and education has been a core focus of these international programs. In these resource constrained countries, the trend of program evaluation started when the funding agencies like European Union, United States International Development and International Monetary Fund have started their grant based programs to support education and literacy in these countries. Program evaluation was then made a mandatory part of their project cycle and these countries were asked to carry out a process evaluation of all the interventions that were taking place and also annually prepare evaluation reports for the same.

Education program evaluation has been considered one of the most challenging tasks in developing countries, since any field related activity requires a set of pre-requisite arrangements and strong logistic planning. There is a fair amount of the dearth of literature pertinent to this topic. Program evaluation in resource constrained settings have been majorly limited to the agencies that are funding those programs and seeking donor funding. It has not reached to all levels and practitioners in the private education system still do not consider it as a vital part of the system. The programmatic education agencies that carry out annual evaluations do not publish their data for advocacy and keep those reports as part of their grant based interventions. There are limited emprical studies on the problems faced by practitioners pertinent to carrying out program evaluation for Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs, specifically in under developed and developing countries.

Considering this as one of the major issues, the following research questions were investigated:

a) What are the problems faced by the early childhood practitioners regarding program evaluation?
b) What factors constitute problems in the field to conduct ECE program evaluation?

Literature Review

Children will be the youth of tomorrow and the leaders of the future. To shape a better future of the society, it is essential to invest in the holistic development of children; hence, it is necessary to educate children in a way that they would be able to take charge of their lives and contribute towards societal development in the future. A child is born with innate qualities and abilities which is a part of their genetic formation and transgenerational health. Moreover, it is mentioned in several recognized investigations that the human mind grows to its best capacities during the initial years of life and a healthy early development leads to a healthy cognitive development in the adulthood (Moss & Clark, 2011). In the past, there was a strong focus on higher education and minimal attention was paid to ECE. However, these aforementioned conceptions are challenged by recent studies, which advocate that brain growth is highly dependent on two core factors: firstly genetics, and secondly experiences that a child has in his/her lifetime.

A central issue in maintaining and continuously monitoring the quality of ECE services for children in need in any program intervention has been a key concern for different programmatic agencies, and they consistently execute this agenda in their program management (Spodek & Saracho, 2014). Various practices have been observed with reference to ECE program evaluation and a number of agencies have been putting in different efforts to schematise this process. Consequently, many tools and measures have been developed by various practitioners to assess the quality of education program for young children (Heckman, Pinto, & Sayelyey, 2012).

Evaluation is a fundamental part of different aspects in educational processes with the major purpose to bring improvement in students' learning and instructions. Evaluation is constantly focused around a few qualities and plans (Bemelmans-Videc & Rist & Vedung, 2011; Chen, 2010; Madaus, Scriven & Stufflebeam, 2012). In order to talk about early childhood education and program evaluation, it is imperative to establish an understanding of what program evaluation is and how it work in context of ECE programs.

Evaluation in general is defined as making a value judgment. Furthermore, it has always been regarded as a process of making informed decisions about the effectiveness or efficacy of any endeavor (Turner, Smith & Peppin, 2013). Many view evaluation as a systematized procedure that makes and incorporates information recommended to lessen the vulnerability around a given system or approach. It is normally expected to answer inquiries or test speculations, the aftereffects of which are then consolidated into the databases utilized by the individuals who have a stake in the project. Evaluations can likewise find unintended impacts of projects and approaches, which can influence general valuations of projects or strategies.

Monitoring and evaluation are the biggest issue, which is often overlooked in the ECE setting. The reason behind this is that governmental and non-governmental bodies are so busy in trying to achieve the mellinium development goals (MDGs) and education for all (EFA) targets, that the focus on quality and relevance is overlooked. Also, the process of evaluation of the program, which can provide further lessons towards shaping other programs, is negligible (Compact & UNICEF, 2013; Sayed, Sprague, UNESCO, UNICEF, Turner, Smith & Peppin, 2013; UNICEF, 2011; UNICEF, 2013). Some efforts are being made to conduct a fair evaluation of the projects provided by governmental and non-governmental organizations, but the issues that were brought to the surface were neither published nor shared. Hence, monitoring, evaluation and dissemination of the results remain the key areas of concern. Because the evaluation is not properly conducted, it is not revealed whether the projects have left any significant impact on the lives of the children in their early years or not. This contextual analysis leaves us to presume that if another project is carried out in a different context has yielded successful results; each and every project would be able to give the same positive impacts. To do this, practitioners are trained and sent to conduct various level of evaluation and come across a number of challenges by which activities are hampered. Hence, the investigation is aimed at exploring the problems faced by the ECE program evaluation practitioners pertinent to it.

Method

The study is designed following a traditional qualitative paradigm using grounded theory as a design for the inquiry to explore the current stated phenomenon. The qualitative paradigm was taken up to ensure that first hand subjective and lived experiences of the practitioners can be studied in depth. The data were collected from 20 practitioners globally by setting an inclusion criteria of chosing the ones who were directly working for childhood education based programs and were involved in program evaluation. The participants were chosen using convenient sampling with a blend of snowball sampling. The reason behind selecting participants based on non random sampling strategies was because there are a handful of people who specialize in the given topic and only through reference the researcher could get an access to the right contacts. The data were collect edusing in depth interviews so that the detailed experiences regarding problems faced by the practitioners for ECE program evaluation could be gauged. The data were extracted from the actual transcribed scripts of the participants' interviews and were analyzed using manual thematic pattern analysis. The themes were identified and generated from open coding and axial coding and verbatim of each interview were taken as citations to support the findings. It was ensured that the names and affiliations of the participants were kept confidential throughout the study by tagging each participant with a unique pseudo name.

Results and Findings

The findings from the data revealed a set of challenges that were faced by the practitioners and these challenges highlighted the problems that could be observed in various resource constrained settings and countries that are underdeveloped and developing. The data were traumatized.

Access. Many of the participants shared that there are severe issues with respect to access in the field, specifically for evaluation. Access has been defined differently by different participants. Some mentioned problems of access to information in the field; they thought getting hold of authentic information was one of the most crucial elements in collecting data to assess the impact of the program. Other participants talked about access with respect to the distance from the central office to the schools in the field. This is a very common phenomenon in all education based programs where schools and field outreach is considered to be the greatest challenge, specifically the ones which are in far flung areas and have severe weather and commuting issues. In this, Jeffery, one of the participants, mentioned:

> *"Travelling and mobility becomes a major area of concern. Once you get to the actual program location and evaluate a couple of programs, then getting in touch with parents becomes a major challenge."*

Another way access was defined by the participants was access to parents and community. In this, one of the participants named Jennifer, mentioned:

> *"You have to have access to people, resources and sites and sometimes that is not very easy. I think that with this particular evaluation, there are a few issues, sometimes even political ones or issues with getting the places, especially in far off areas."*

Few of the participants mentioned that it was extremely difficult to reach out to the community because of the set pattern and common lifestyle practiced in resource constrained settings, where people are heavily engaged in domestic chores and income generation during the day time.

Permission. Participants mentioned and believed that another important challenge related to field based data collection is seeking permission. Permission is taken into account in two aspects. One is the fact that the evaluator, being a foreigner and an external member, requires security clearance from the consulate. Secondly, s/he is also an outsider in the school s/he is visiting. The second one seems very challenging as the school visits require formal permission from the authorities at different levels, and need to be informed beforehand, in order to ensure that the person going for the evaluation is facilitated by the administration.

Safety. This element was mentioned by most of the participants as they thought that safety was a major challenging and a risky factor; however, all evaluators had to accept this risk while carrying out field based data collection. This is because sometimes schools are in areas that are politically or socially threatened or in extremely deprived settings. Participants also mentioned that there are instances where potential threats were also received for ransom, kidnapping and physical harassment.

Involving children and parents. Most of the participants explained that one of the major challenges pertinent to the field and evaluation data collection is also finding out the perspective of all the key beneficiaries. It was the most perplexing factor for quite a few participants to investigate perceptions and feelings of young children involved in the program and get input from their parents. Ethel, one of the participants, mentioned:

> *"This is the main problem when interviewing a child and the other is going into a community or a family to get feedback. Early childhood development is an issue that is very close to the family and sometimes families are reluctant to share information. You can't rely on one methodology because in some contexts, it works and in some it doesn't."*

Most of the participants mentioned that they found that these beneficiaries were scared to share their experiences, while others found it difficult to communicate. One of the participants, Bree, shared an interesting point and stated:

> *"Another challenge that I think evaluators face when we enter an early childhood classroom is that we are the center of attention because young children look at us, and they get distracted by the presence of a new person. So the ability to be quiet and make yourself unnoticeable atthe back of the classroom is a good skill to have, so that you don't distract the children."*

Besides, it is even more difficult because of the ethical aspects attached to it. Another participant, Lineth, endorsed this and shared:

> *"Interviewing young children may be challenging if parental consent is not provided and/or children are interviewed by a person who does not speak their language/dialect."*

Catering to Diversity. Almost all the participants mentioned that the most challenging task is to understand the culture of the settings where the program interventions are taking place. A few participants mentioned that sometimes a project is country wide, which enables an evaluator to travel to different destinations to collect data

for impact evaluation. They shared that they sometimes come across a phase where in just a week they had to experience different cultures, lifestyles, facts, community demographics and local practices. Moreover, a few participants mentioned that it is not only knowing respecting diversity, but in most contexts they had to look like one of them. Also a few participants mentioned that trying to adjust in different weather conditions, logistical arrangements, food and political conditions becomes a concern too.

Discussion

Evaluation is a crucial part of any project cycle and its significance cannot be ignored. However, the process of evaluation comes with a great set of challenges out of which field related issues are of fundamental focus. The teams in verge of collecting data for the evaluation face a number of challenges as stated by the participants and it becomes more critical when it comes to evaluating programs that involve children. The similar findings are highlighted by scholars (Cashi, Clark, Alcock, Dickson, Eckley & Guston & Mitchell, 2003; Cowen, 1978; Fitzpatrick, Sanders & Worthen, 2004; Guba, 1978; Mog, 2004; Rogers, Petrosino, Huebner & Hacsi, 2000; Shadish, Cook & Leviton, 1991; Steinemann, 2003).

As can be revealed from the data analysis that the major problem is about access, usually it is seen that most devastated of the population are hardest to reach. The access to such communities is one of the most challenging tasks since the population falls below the poverty line. There are no roads properly constructed, most of these places are deprived of water and sanitation facilities, electricity and weather shielding is an overarching issue and there are no places which offer reasonable accommodation. In addition, there is a lack of management by means of communication with respect to having public transport or telecommunication services. In such conditions, it becomes difficult for the programmatic teams to stay in the communities and carry out ethnographic evaluation studies (Cashi, Clark, Alcock, Dickson, Eckley & Guston & Mitchell, 2003).

Another problem highlighted was of the permissions and security threats. It has been observed in the past two decades that the programmatic interventions have risen considering the exigency of the targets set in MDGs and SDGs, specifically in the resource constraint areas and thus a need to go to the affected populations and carry out field level interventions. These programs involve an eco-system based permissions to operate in the identified communities. The agencies working on achieving such targets prefer across board permissions and consent starting from the government to the most direct beneficiaries. Sometimes, if the areas where communities reside are high risk, the foreign and non native project staff do not get permission to visit those sites to carry our programmatic activities. Apart from the permission and consent, the element of safety is also a major concern. It is reported in several developmental studies related to human ethos that incidental killings and life threats to NGO staff is a common phenomena

attached to the projects working in health and education (Steinemann, 2003). Hence, it is fair to believe that security threats also play a major role in program management that ultimately impacts program evaluation.

The evaluation also becomes problematic if there is a lack of acceptance from the program teams and other key stakeholders who are working on the delivery side. It is observed in the limitation section of many reports of such programmatic interventions that stakeholders resist in providing the key information from the program staff and specifically from the evaluation teams. There are also quite a few cited analysis that present lack of information sharing by the local municipal offices/district offices for evaluation purposes. A few practitioners have also highlighted that data often is fictionalized at the office and district level to demonstrate high achievement of the projects and outcome measures (Mog, 2004; Rogers, Petrosino, Huebner & Hacsi, 2000).

Other highlighted reasons for problems related to early childhood education program evaluation is its sensitivity of the targeted audience. Dealing with young children and measuring their learning achievements is also a very serious task. Young children and programs concerning their education play a vital role in the overall economic development and have proven to bring a sense of gratification in the communities. However, managing these programs require a great deal of effort and evaluating them requires a step ahead of alertness and efficiency. Early childhood programs can mainly be evaluated using measures that edirectly influence children in a formal education setup, for instance, classroom interactions, classroom environment, teaching quality, curriculum, stakeholder support and children learning achievement (Cowen, 1978). Often it is believed that children's achievement and performance outcomes are a byproduct of a wide range of variables that affect children, their brain and their learning acquisition. Hence, designing evaluation studies or program evaluation focusing on assessing the impact on children becomes technically difficult.

All in all evaluating programs in resource constrained settings is not a task everybody can take up. It requires a special set of skills, willingness and ground level experience. The problems that emerge during this activity remain constant from context to context, whereas a well trained, experienced and skilled early childhood education program evaluation expert may be able to deal with it (Fitzpatrick, Sanders & Worthen, 2004; Guba, 1978; Shadish, Cook & Leviton, 1991). The quality of a skilled professional in the entire process of evaluation to combat overcoming difficulties must not be compromised at any level.

Conclusion

Despite spending large sums of money on the project itself, there is no key learning mapped out during the process, to enhance the results. Moreover, there is no present evidence on which one can plan the next ECE projects/programs. There is a dire need to evaluate programs during and after completion, in order to channel out the discrepancies, gauge areas for improvement and identify key lessons learnt from the projects. Such evaluations of ECE programs/projects would actually provide an insight into planning the next set of ECE programs and might be able to incorporate the factors that are not usually taken into account while planning the same. To conclude, there is a dire need to look at the problems in more detail and observe the interconnectedness of these issues.

As for another important facet of foreseeing and coordinating field based issues that may arise before, during, or after the evaluation activity are the challenges that hinder the evaluation activites. These factors range over an array of states and conditions. In order to best be able to deal with such instances, researchers must foremost be aware of the fact that such instances may occur. Atother times, such alternatives may be employed such as a proxy indicator for data collection and others. It is also important for the evaluators to be aware of the fact that the quality of provided data may vary greatly. Another important factor to note with respect to field sites is that there may be populations that have undergone war, lost lives, loved ones, belongings and their sense of security and socio-cultural identities may be destroyed. Due to this, it is important to learn how to deal with trauma while collecting data from among the affected people. Data collection is in itself a costly process; however, in times of disaster this expense increases tenfolds. The cost of operating in regions that have faced calamities increases drastically. Consequently, convincing personnel to work in areas that may not be completely safe is a hard task in itself and failure to do so may result in a shortage of human resources. Collecting information in such areas will also mean the need for vehicles and lodging, which are very difficult to arrange in times of havoc (Axinn & Pearce, 2006; Balen, Blyth, Calabretto, Fraser, Belsky, Vandell, Burchinal, Clarke-Stewart, McCartney & Owen, 2007; Clark, 2005; Cresswell, 2012; Horrocks & Manby, 2006; Larose, 2014; Ramsay, 2006; Wholey, Hatry & Newcomer, 2010). However, it is vital for all the programs to undergo in depth evaluation irrespective of the problems that come alongside. Since, only through quality monitoring and consistent improvement cycles of such programs the access and provision of ECD services can be up scaled.

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