

Appendix A: Method

Guiding Questions

1. What are the characteristics of effective continuous improvement/evaluation (particularly participatory, collaborative, empowerment, utilization-focused) processes in related sectors (particularly K-12) that could inform the development and use of these processes with after-school programs?
2. Who are the primary intended users of evaluation data in after-school programs? What information do these stakeholders need and for what purpose(s)?
3. What capacity do after-school programs have to contribute to or engage in effective continuous improvement/evaluation processes?
4. What resources do after-school programs need to more effectively contribute to or engage in effective continuous improvement/evaluation?
5. What are the characteristics of effective continuous improvement/evaluation processes currently being used with after-school programs? What has worked less well?
6. What strategies might the Mott Foundation use to build the capacity of after-school programs to effectively contribute to or engage in effective continuous improvement/evaluation?

Review of Relevant Literature

Prior to designing data collection instruments, study team members completed a review of the relevant literature in the following areas to identify key themes that might inform data collection and interpretation (guiding question 1 above). The following content areas and evaluation approaches were reviewed:

- Accreditation systems for programs providing care and education of children/youth;
- Action research;
- Continuous improvement;
- Empowerment evaluation;
- Learning organizations/organizational learning;
- Participatory evaluation;
- Total quality management in education and business; and
- Utilization-focused evaluation.

Team members completed a thematic analysis of available documents, focusing predominantly on articles and books published since 1990 (one resource dating back to 1953 was used). Themes were identified related to:

- Definition;
- Purpose/rationale behind model or strategy;

- Key roles of players in process;
- Typical process followed;
- Values/premises and distinguishing characteristics associated with model or strategy;
- Common factors that facilitate success in using the model or strategy; and
- Common factors found to inhibit effective use of model or strategy.

Abstracts of each content area and evaluation approach appear in Appendix C.

Instruments

The study team developed a number of instruments to gather information to address guiding questions 2-6.

Exploratory Interview Protocol. Study team members completed structured interviews with 13 respondents via the telephone between January and March 2001. The interview protocol covered the following topics:

- Experiences with or current use of continuous improvement and/or evaluation in before- and after-school programs;
- Purposes and motivations behind using continuous improvement and/or evaluation;
- Defining the concepts of evaluation, accreditation, and continuous improvement;
- Tools used in continuous improvement and/or evaluation processes that have proven helpful (i.e., logic models, surveys, and so forth);
- Challenges faced by before- and after-school programs when engaging in continuous improvement and/or evaluation efforts; and
- Determining who uses the data collected during continuous improvement and/or evaluation efforts and for what purposes the data is used.

In-depth Interview Protocol. Study team members completed in-depth interviews with 19 respondents via the telephone between April and June 2001. The interview protocol covered the following topics:

- Experiences with or current use of continuous improvement and/or evaluation in before- and after-school programs:
 - Use of external resource people (what was their role, how helpful were they?)
 - Who is responsible for leading the continuous improvement and/or evaluation efforts and how front line staff is involved in the process
 - Changes in approach over time, fit with the organization's goals and culture;
- Models or approaches to continuous improvement and/or evaluation used by programs*;
- Purposes and motivations behind using continuous improvement and/or evaluation;

- Defining the concepts of evaluation, accreditation, and continuous improvement*;
- Tools used in continuous improvement and/or evaluation processes that have proven helpful (i.e., logic models, surveys, and so forth);
- Factors helpful to, and challenges faced by, programs engaging in continuous improvement and/or evaluation efforts;
- Users of data collected during continuous improvement and/or evaluation efforts and purposes for which data is used; and
- Resources needed for programs to engage in continuous improvement and/or evaluation.

* topics covered more specifically with researchers and/or evaluators

Focus Group/Structured Interview Protocol. Study team members and consultants conducted 22 focus groups and 15 individual interviews using the focus group protocol between March and May 2001. The protocol covered the following topics:

- Who, within the program, makes decisions regarding program design, scheduling, activities, and staffing, how are these decisions made, and what information is used to make these decisions;
- What would “ideal” evaluation look like;
- Current requirements for participating in evaluation activities;
- Factors helpful to, and challenges faced by, programs engaging in continuous improvement and/or evaluation efforts;
- Participation in accreditation processes and, if so, how does it fit with continuous improvement; and
- Advice to Mott Foundation about how to support continuous improvement and/or evaluation efforts.

Program Fact Sheet. Focus group participants and individual interview respondents completed a written form that asked for the following types of information:

- Location of program (urban, suburban, rural/small town) and number of sites;
- Demographic information about participants;
- Focus of program (enrichment, academic assistance, recreation) and activities offered;
- Sources of funding; and

- Current requirements for continuous improvement and/or evaluation and/or participation in accreditation processes.

Respondents

Recruitment Process. Study team members solicited nominations between January and March 2001 to develop a pool of potential respondents. As a first step, team members contacted key informants across the United States who are developers of evaluation models/materials, program evaluators, state-level grant managers, or representatives of national offices of program sponsors (e.g., Boys & Girls Club). These individuals were asked to nominate potential respondents for the in-depth interviews and focus groups/structured interviews.

Team members then circulated a study abstract and nomination forms to exploratory interview respondents, state-level grant managers, representatives of state- and national-level associations, and select listserves to identify respondents for in-depth telephone interviews and focus groups/structured interviews. Two types of respondents were recruited:

- Key informants who have successfully designed or implemented evaluation and/or continuous improvement processes in one or more after-school programs in the United States (19 respondents);
- Senior-level staff from the full range of after-school programs for school-age children across the United States. Focus group/structured interview respondents were clustered in four regions (East: Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Maryland; West: California, Oregon; South: Texas, Oklahoma; Upper Midwest: Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin).

A full list of respondents is included in Appendix B.

Characteristics of respondents participating in focus groups/individual interviews.

Study team members and consultants used the respondent pool to identify respondents representing programs that varied in terms of:

- Program auspices, profit status, and location;
- Characteristics of program participants (e.g., age, economic status of family, racial/ethnic background);
- Program size in terms of enrollment;
- Self-reported use/non-use of continuous improvement strategies; and
- Primary program focus (e.g., enrichment, academic remediation/support, recreational).

Characteristics of these 169 respondents are summarized in Table A-1 below.

Table A-1: Respondent Characteristics

| Type of Respondent | Estimated % of Total Respondents |
|--|---|
| Program administrators, directors, facilitators, coordinators | 90% |
| External evaluators or consultants | 10% |
| Respondents working in programs located in urban settings | 59% |
| Respondents working in programs in rural settings | 21% |
| Respondents working in larger programs (≥ 71 children) | 51% |
| Respondents working in programs enrolling high concentrations of children from low-income families | 85% |
| Respondents working in programs serving high concentrations of children who are African-American, American Indian, Asian-American, or Hispanic | 68% |
| Respondents working in programs serving children in preschool/elementary grades | 76% |
| Respondents reporting minimal use of continuous improvement strategies | 16% |
| Respondents reporting a primary focus of their program is academic/remediation | 39% |

Source: Program fact sheets completed by respondents.

Data Analysis

We used six major steps to reduce and analyze the data that were collected from in-depth interview and focus group respondents (including those individual interviews using the focus group protocol):

- Preparation of interview/focus groups transcripts;
- Preparation of summary write-ups for each focus group and set of in-depth interviews using a common format;
- A structured, one-day, debriefing session in which all members of the study team who conducted interviews and focus groups met to identify themes related to each of the key evaluation questions;
- Coding of interview/focus group transcripts for narrative to support and illuminate each identified theme; this step led to some re-definition of themes; and
- Preparation of a thematic memo for each guiding evaluation question to illuminate and substantiate each theme with coded narrative.

Limitations of the Data

The reader needs to be aware of a number of key limitations in the data we collected:

- We limited our respondent pool to individuals working in or with before- and after-school programs that enroll children and youth on a regular basis. This means that a number of settings in which children and youth spend their out-of-school time were not included, such as programs that operate primarily on a drop-in basis or only a few days

per week, programs and initiatives that focus on fostering adult-child mentoring relationships, community service, and so forth.

- By focusing on the use of evaluation and continuous improvement in programs, we excluded a systematic analysis of the need for, and use of, these strategies at the community-level.
- All findings are based on information self-reported by respondents, primarily program administrators and directors or evaluators. The findings have not been substantiated through a process called triangulation that typically involves the incorporation of more than one source of data for each question. We did not have the opportunity to talk with many front-line staff in these programs. We did not complete any site visits or direct observation of the use of evaluation and continuous improvement processes. As a result, our analyses represent overall themes that were discerned from transcripts and interview write-ups. These themes represent a mix of descriptive facts and perceptions of our respondents.