COP MEETING 21 AUGUST 2019

PHILIPPI VILLAGE

LEARNING BRIEF:
MONITORING & EVALUATION IN AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMMES

This learning brief was produced by The Learning Trust in partnership with the After School Programme Office which drives after school programming as a priority project of the Western Cape Government. The brief emerged following a Community of Practice meeting of non-governmental organisations offering after school programming. These Community of Practice meetings are held three times a year and this one on monitoring and evaluation was the 11th since they started in 2016.

The Community of Practice (COP) brings together a range of organisations working in the After School space across the four pillars: academic support & e-learning, sports & recreation, arts & culture, and life skills & psycho-social support. COP meetings take on different topics, and this one focused on Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E).

A key learning from the COP was for organisations to take ownership of M&E within their own context, and then use it to make decisions and communicate their impact. Essentially, organisations were encouraged to examine first, what challenges their programme is seeking to resolve and secondly, assessing whether their chosen programme is working as a solution to those challenges.

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Building onto our learnings from the first M&E COP in 2017, the outcomes set for this meeting were specifically related to the sharing of data and common tools that all in the sector could be using to determine our collective impact. It is our understanding that the extent to which individual organisations successfully implement M&E ultimately strengthens the sector's case for the importance of extended learning and in so doing, mobilises the necessary resources and funding to support its work.

1 TAKING OWNERSHIP OF M&E

KEY TERMS

Monitoring: This is a process that answers the question about what is happening (descriptive).

Evaluation: This is when we collect and analyse data, and make a value judgement about it (analytic).

Increasingly, M&E outcomes are seen as directly related to successful fundraising – and this can be frightening for many. For this reason, organisations often tend to seek out external M&E services and support, which then extricates us from the critical benefit that the M&E lens provides in assessing our impact. This approach misses the opportunity to take ownership of M&E and use it as an active tool for regular tracking and future adaptations to our programmes. M&E is now frequently referred to as MEL, the L standing for "learning" in order to emphasise that ongoing learning is key to the M&E process.

2 KNOWING WHAT WE ARE ALREADY DOING

Although not always formal, the majority of organisations do have some way of monitoring the success of their programmes. They might be learning from every day conversations with their constituents or even tracking learner attendance and appraising facilitator reports. These are all ways that can provide the evidence needed to determine if our programmes are achieving what they set out to do. We don't have to be experts to apply M&E principles. In fact, there is no "right" and "wrong" way to do M&E. If it allows an organisation to know if their desired outcome is relevant and that it is being achieved, it is the right way (e.g. reduced school drop-out, increased academic attainment, or reduced incidents of school-based violence). We can easily get bedazzled by specialised M&E apps and tools when we have a sound foundation in what we already have. Therefore, begin with M&E from where we are and what data we are already collecting.

3 STARTING WITH A PROBLEM STATEMENT

M&E starts with knowing the problem or challenge a programme has been designed to fix. Without an exact understanding of what we are trying to change, it is impossible to be clear on anything else. If we are starting an After School Programme (ASP) we need to ask:

- **Why are we doing this work?**
- **What issue/problem are we trying to address?**

A good problem statement will help us to know what to measure, why we are measuring it, what data we need to collect to measure it, the tools available to collect this data, as well as guiding who is collecting it and how. Many ASPs might include some of these problem statements on their list:

- **Lack of safe spaces for learners**
- **Lack of caring adults for learners**
- **Lack of support/capacity to address learner barriers**
- **Lack of support/capacity to address learners' trauma**
- **Poor academic performance in maths**
- **High learner drop-out**

4 TESTING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

Problems are a good beginning, but they still need to be tested for assumptions, and even made to be more specific. Sometimes we make assumptions that things are a problem and then design a solution for something that is not actually a problem. To test our thinking, we need to ask these questions:

- **How did we form our judgement?**
- **What was that based on e.g. any evidence used?**
- **What else could have influenced our answer?**

Take for example the problem statement of "high learner drop-out." Many organisations have formed judgements based on the National Development Plan and statistics that highlighted this as a national problem in schools. In an attempt to solve this 'problem', organisations started offering academic interventions, only to realise that they didn't have a full understanding of why there are high drop-out rates to begin with. The root causes of high learner drop-out are many and are often context specific, e.g. teacher shortage/ absence, learners' lack of solid foundations in literacy and numeracy, misconceptions of the value of education, high unemployment rates among matriculants, home responsibilities, hopelessness and general apathy.

Again, it is important that we ask and understand the underlying problem that we are trying to fix, and not be too quick to address the manifesting symptoms that are usually more visible. The evaluative thinking framework can help us with this. Follow the link listed at the end of this brief to find more ways of critical thinking, asking questions and testing assumptions.

5 FINDING APPROPRIATE STAKEHOLDERS FOR OUR CONTEXT

One way to find out more about the problem, is to talk to people on the ground. In one programme, the problem statement was "lack of caring adults", but when the designers of the programme went to talk with the teachers and the parents of the intended beneficiaries, they found that this was seldom the case. Most of these learners were well-cared for! Before settling on our problem statement, we need to talk to the various stakeholders, including the potential target beneficiaries themselves, as well as their teachers, primary caregivers and broader community, to determine whether this stated problem is informed and context-specific.

USEFUL INDICATORS AND TOOLS

The Action Impact Network (AIN) is an international consortium of NGOs using sports and mentoring activities to improve the well-being and life skills of at-risk youth. The network has developed a shared logic model, a set of practical indicators, and data collection tools to measure the collective impact of programmes delivering mental health and wellness solutions to at-risk youth, using sport as a platform.
The AIN has developed three surveys for organisations to measure their impact and benchmark against other organisations in the sector, both locally and internationally.

- **The** organisational survey **has "input" indicators – a passionate adult such as a mentor or coach, as well as the vulnerable at-risk young person.**
- **The** mentor survey **has "process" indicators around the safety of the space used, programme delivery and participant reach.**
- **The** participant survey **has "immediate outcomes" indicators which are trust, skills development and belonging to a group.**

The tools are open source for organisations to use and adapt for their own needs. It should be noted that many of them are self-reported and so data must be strengthened with additional qualitative data.

6 IDENTIFYING INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

Often, the intended result of our programme will be the opposite of the problem statement. For example, if the problem statement is: "30% of learners fail maths in grade 11," then the intended result would be: "All learners pass maths in grade 11". As organisations, we need to figure out how we will know when we have been successful. Here are some questions we can ask ourselves:

- **How can we know if our** programme is working**? What are the key markers of success? For example: learners attend regularly; tutors attend regularly; targets for individual learners are achieved; mindsets are changing; learners try to answer all the questions; grade progression; learners' school attendance increases; learners master a skill.**
- **What** data already exists **to help us determine whether our programme is working? For example, attendance registers; learner school reports; teacher and caregiver anecdotal reports; systemic results.**

- **What** other evidence **do we need to determine whether our programme is working? For example: learner, tutor, teacher and caregiver surveys; school drop-out, attendance rates, grade progression data; standardised programme observation; standardised skills grading.**

Another consideration for organisations who may not know their successes is to be comfortable with reporting on failures instead. After all, M&E is about learning rather than proving that we are successful at all times.

USING ATTENDANCE DATA AS A FOUNDATION

Year Beyond trains unemployed (18-25 years old) matriculants to become tutors who give academic support to grade 4 learners. The programme has two sets of beneficiaries i.e. the tutors and the learners, and therefore requires strategic and extensive data collection. The programme has been careful not to collect data for data's sake or to fall into the trap of being 'data rich and insight poor'.

The programme's expectation is that through regular attendance, learners are able to access all the benefits of the intervention, which will ultimately result in positive learner outcomes. The collection of learner attendance data and tutor attendance data is therefore necessary to monitor. However, there is recognition that this is just the foundation. Learners may be attending regularly, but the quality of the programme they are attending could be poor. Therefore, the attendance data is supplemented by standardised programme observation and tutor focus groups which allow for real-time feedback and evidence-based decision making.

Year Beyond emphasises that everyone, from practitioner to management, should be interpreting the data in order to make better decisions and improve day-to-day programme delivery. Again, this starts with the attendance data, e.g. if one particular learner is uncharacteristically absent, or if average attendance is low on a specific day, the tutor can investigate the reasons for this and adapt accordingly.

Once there is a good handle on whether a programme is being delivered as intended, the next big question is: are the programme outcomes being achieved? To answer this question data is collected on school performance through individual CEMIS number data as well as evaluation of outcomes for the tutors.

7 TRACKING UNIQUE LEARNERS AND SHARING DATA ON EDUCOLLOBORATE

A common challenge of data collection in ASPs is that learners may sign up for multiple programmes offered by different organisation; they may attend a programme without actually signing up for it; they may sign up and not attend; or they may attend sporadically. For example, we might record that we have 20 learners at our skate park every afternoon, but if this is not the same 20 learners, it is difficult to know whether our intervention is making a difference to those learners over time. We need to be able to track when learners are actually present at programmes and to track them as unique individuals so that we can be accurate about what improvements we can attribute to our interventions.

If we have the data that tells us who is in our programmes and how frequently they are attending, we can also conduct other kinds of MEL. For example, it is then possible to administer surveys or conduct focus groups with our cohorts and make inferences about the value that our programme adds to a learner's self-belief, resilience, critical thinking skills, social and emotional well-being, and other outcomes.

Educollaborate is a centralised database that has the ability to track learners using their unique CEMIS numbers. Moreover, data is collected from multiple ASPs which allows us to start seeing which programmes are working well and achieving positive results. This means that ultimately, we can use Educollaborate to decipher best practice programmes and learn from one another to strengthen our inputs to produce the desired collective outcomes.

8 SHARING DATA WITH ALL OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Data doesn't exist in isolation – its context is important. It must be shared with everyone involved and so the feedback loop with multiple stakeholders is key. All who are involved should get a chance to talk about challenges, give feedback on the quantitative data collected and tell their part in the story. We need to make sure that the data collected, reported on and evaluated gets disseminated to all relevant stakeholders, including schools, parents, learners, practitioners, and managers.

5 CONCLUSION

There are various ways that organisations are informally monitoring their successes and their failures, and these are a good way to start with M&E. A key thing to remember is that it is not so much what data we are collecting but how we are using it. In this regard, it is important that the data that we collect can be speedily analysed to more effectively inform our programming. Ultimately, M&E is integral to telling the complete story of After School. Therefore, sharing the data that we all collect is an important way to build the strength of the After School sector and to more fully assess its collective impact.

RESOURCES AND LINKS

- Mapping of schools, resources, ASPs, and CEMIS numbers:
  Educollaborate Western Cape

- For more about the Action Impact Network, go to:
  Action Impact Network

- To find learning briefs from previous COPs, go to:
  www.thelearningtrust.org

- For more on the evaluative thinking framework go to
  www.insightsintoimpact.com

- **Being an Evaluator: Your Practical Guide to Evaluation** (2018) by Donna R Podems is an accessible practical book on doing evaluations and fostering reflective practice. Available on Amazon.