



This Learning Brief is part of a series emerging from the After School Game Changer Symposium held on the 16th and 17th of February 2017.

LEARNING BRIEF 3: Monitoring and Evaluation



In developing countries such as South Africa the after school space is new territory and there have been few rigorous evaluations of programmes. It's important to understand that quality in an after school programme must be measured not by what goes into it, but rather by what the learner gets out of it. The Western Cape Government's After School Game Changer aims to have 112 000 learners from poor schools attending after school programming on a regular and sustained basis by 2019. Tracking this, as well as whether learners are in fact benefiting from these programmes, is critical in determining the success of the After School Game Changer.

HAVE PURPOSE DRIVEN MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Any kind of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) must be purpose-driven and the distinction between “monitoring” and “evaluation” needs to be clear. Monitoring is internal to an organisation where indicators of success are identified and tracked over time. Evaluation is external to the organisation where the effectiveness and impact of the programme is determined. In designing M&E, programmes need to be guided by what the designers' idea of success is and how it will be achieved. Some of the key functions for M&E include learning, accountability and the measurement of outcomes and impact.

Learning

Programmes collect data to learn and to figure out what is effective in order to continuously improve programme roll out. In this way M&E is a key element of programme management and planning.

Accountability

Programmes need to be accountable to their stakeholders, especially the learner participants and the funders.



Outcomes and impact

Programmes need to find ways to measure their outcomes and impact. This requires a long term view because impact doesn't always happen quickly.

There is a risk that M&E can take away from doing the real work and that programmes can become obsessed with measurement which drains their capacity. M&E must be designed to be in service of programmes and an integral part of programme delivery.

Use a theory of change

Programmes need to have a “theory of change”, essentially describing how inputs will lead to the desired outputs, outcomes and impact. The theory of change should describe the current situation and document what has worked elsewhere to change similar situations. It should then map out and develop a causal pathway for the change that is required. In doing this it should show how the interventions will address the binding constraints that currently prevent the problem from being resolved.

A theory of change helps programme staff to select indicators that track the programme's implementation and outcomes. It is important that a system of feedback loops is part of the process. A theory of change needs to be regularly revised and updated, preferably through a collaborative process with all stakeholders.

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Triangulate qualitative and quantitative

Most funders want quantitative data and M&E is often focused on this. Qualitative data is however needed to supplement numbers, or to explain and give a fuller picture of what is going on. For example, there may be quantitative indicators to track the academic performance of students but qualitative feedback from practitioners can show where training and support are needed. The Theory of Change assists in identifying the mix between qualitative and quantitative indicators.

Quantitative M&E focuses on specific things that are actively identified and not necessarily unintended outcomes of programmes. An advantage of qualitative data is therefore that it can assist in identifying additional outcomes from the programme. For example, a donor was focused on quantitative health gains in an after school soccer project that gave out health information. They discovered however through face to face interviews that the programme had a range of other physical and social benefits.

USE INDICATORS

Some practitioners have pointed out that they can identify a good after school programme just by turning up and observing learner engagement and involvement. This kind of qualitative picture should always be considered in conjunction with data derived from quantitative indicators.

Attendance

Enrolment numbers as well as regular and consistent attendance figures are good indicators by which to monitor after school programmes. Practitioners must be aware however that attendance data is not necessarily linked to learner outcomes and hence additional measurement of this will be required.

Experience from others in the after school field suggest starting with a good robust manual system, understanding the challenges and then moving to a more sophisticated system, i.e. considering Apps that can help measure attendance. Monitoring attendance can be more challenging when not done electronically or within an online environment, however one needs to juxtapose this against the data costs and other structural challenges.

It is important to note that attendance data is not always valid and consistent. For example, learners may have been recorded as being present, and to have taken the provided meal, but this does not mean they have actually eaten the meal or participated in the programme activities.

Academic

Improvement of academic results can be a good indicator of the success of an after school programme.

Numeric, an organisation offering after school maths, did a randomised control trial of 472 learners where some learners were part of the programme and others were not. Half were part of the treatment group (236) and half (236) were part of the control group. After one year, improvements were found in the maths results of the treatment group.

In South Africa academic results from grade 12 are usually used, but there is recognition of the need to track academic results from grade R. The Western Cape does systemic evaluations of the maths and language of every learner in grades 3, 6 and 9. These results could be used to measure the impact of after school programmes.

Social and emotional

A big rationale for providing after school programming is the expectation that learners do better on standardised tests. Certainly in contrast to social and emotional indicators, academic ability is easy to measure. There are questions however about whether academic indicators are the right ones to use at all.

Some practitioners believe that the indicators used to measure the quality of after school programmes should rather be focused on self-esteem, social-emotional development or a sense of agency. Practitioners are coming to understand that it's more important for learners to feel safe and comfortable and joyful about learning than it is to actually helping them learn. There aren't clear ways to measure these things yet.

Reduced risk-taking behaviour

Indicators that measure a reduction in risk taking behaviour can also help show the impact of after school programmes. The concept of risky behaviour needs to be fully operationalised in order to render useful data. Some practitioners for instance have suggested tracking the number of learners accessing contraception from health care facilities, or the number of learners falling pregnant. However, there is general agreement that these indicators are limited and need further work. There is huge potential for future collaboration in how best to measure a reduction in risky behaviour.

COLLABORATE

Considering the costs and the effort involved in data collection from all stakeholders it is important that there is planning, collaboration and sharing of data. It is defeating to have many actors in the same space measuring the same things many times! In addition, best practice in after school M&E will only evolve if stakeholders share their methodologies and approaches.

Share data

Access to data is a huge constraint to M&E. This challenge is further exacerbated with the Protection of Personal Information Act. Existing data-sharing practices should be built on. There needs to be agreement on headline indicators and standardised tools, for example simplified spread sheets. Then there is a need for shared databanks and analytical capacity.

Use simple technology

Data is constantly changing and technology plays a big role in managing and storing these “moments in time.” So much information can be captured automatically, for example using features like location sharing. In using technology however, keeping things simple is important. Even if implementation is complex, interfaces should be simple. There must be absolute clarity on what to track and what not to track.

Engage learners

It is important that the participants in the after school programmes, i.e. the learners, are engaged in M&E. Learners can be motivated by seeing how they have progressed and their feedback is invaluable in informing the improvement of programmes.

Conclusion

Monitoring and evaluation must be built into after school programming so that the positive impact on learners is measured. Practitioners should use a theory of change and triangulate their findings using both qualitative and quantitative data. Technology can assist especially, using Client Relationship Management Systems to manage data, but organisations should be discerning about what indicators they track and ensure that systems and processes are kept as simple as possible. It is important that different stakeholders work together on monitoring and evaluation and share best practice. The After School Game Changer is committed to building a community of practice around monitoring and evaluation so that data collection can be standardised, streamlined and shared.

