Adapting Evaluation Materials for Remote Indigenous Communities and Low-Literacy Participants

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Introduction

Funders (quite rightly) expect that the money invested in social programs will produce results. Further and increasingly, they are expecting that evidence of these outcomes is produced. However, these outcomes, sometimes described in terms of performance indicators, are often prescribed from a western frame of reference and consequently, there is an expectation that evidence is reported within the same frame of reference. This of course is not a problem when the funder, the service providers and the service users all have the same frame of reference, but what might happen when service users and service providers have a different frame of reference from the funder? Put another way, what happens when the social norms, values and expectations of service users differ so much from those of the funder that performance indicators determined by a funder are effectively meaningless to the program's intended targets. Unfortunately what is likely to happen is that the outcomes expected of a program will not be achieved. This may not be because the program is not working but 1) because the program objectives are reinterpreted to suit the local context or 2) the instruments used to measure outcomes are inadequate for the task.

The latter issue is the challenge faced by Families and Schools Together (FAST), a program designed to build capacity and resilience in families, strengthen family relationships and build connections between families and communities. FAST is an international program with a strong evidence base. Its emphasis on evaluation is a strong selling point for funders, who are seeking to make a difference. FAST has now for a number of years been delivered in remote communities of the Northern Territory. However, what FAST found was that in remote contexts the evaluation tools simply did not work. The language of the psychometric tools and the abstract concepts used were complex and at odds with the way Indigenous people would describe things. They felt that a different tool was required—one that reflected both the outcomes anticipated by the evidence base, and one that also reflected the language and frame of reference or worldview of local Indigenous people.

This paper considers approaches to evaluation in this context. It also describes a process used by evaluators and program staff to produce a tool that met the dual needs of the funder but that also represented the outcomes as they were perceived by participants.

Evaluation methodologies

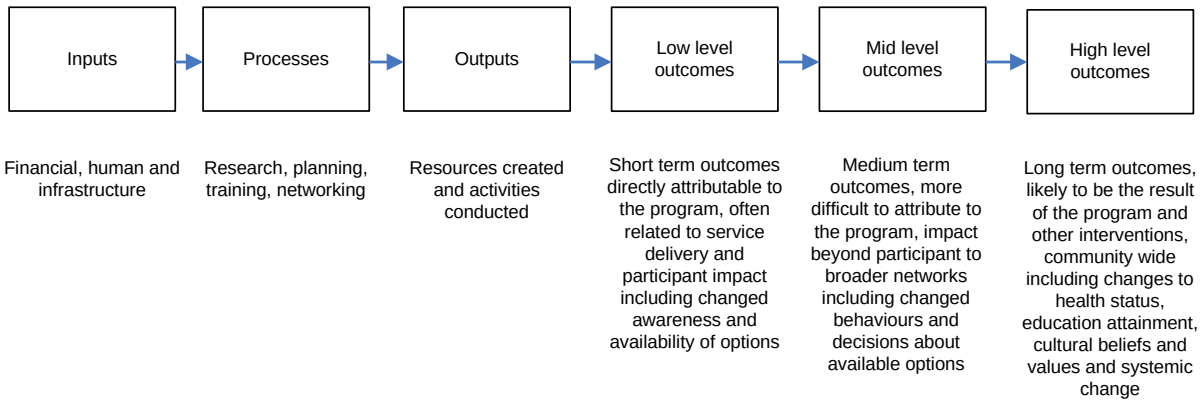
In this section the intent is to ground the paper in a discussion about evaluation methodologies. We first discuss the role of program logic before considering relevant literature on indicators, data and evidence. We also present a review of the literature about complicated and complex evaluations.

Program logic as a tool

Program logic may be based on 'theories of change' assumptions—emphasising the theoretical foundations of a program; or an 'outcome approach' which emphasises the causal linkages between outputs and outcomes; or an 'activities approach' which emphasises intended work plans (Patton 2002; W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2004). One of the perceived benefits of a program logic approach is that it builds an 'evidence base' (Pawson 2002). An important use of a logic model is to assist with the identification of indicators that will measure the intended outcomes. The choice of indicators is critical for determining impact. There is a tendency in some program

evaluations to incorrectly ascribe process and output statements to outcomes (Mitchell 2000). Program logic as a methodology is not without its critics. There is a risk that use of program logic may prescribe an outcomes framework that ultimately is not valid. Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007) warn that evaluators using this approach may 'focus attention on theory developed early in the program and later discover that the program has evolved to be a quite different enterprise from what was theorised at the outset'. These are valid criticisms but as a tool for helping to identify anticipated impact, it is still a valuable construct. Hence one of the first tasks of any evaluation can be to develop a program logic model. A sample generic logic model is shown below in Figure 1. Generally, logic models would show a direct and explicit connection between outputs and low level outcomes. There should, however be reasoned assumptions underpinning the progress of impact towards high level outcomes.

Figure 1.Generic program logic model



Indicators: data and evidence

Monitoring for the purpose of evaluation and reporting is frequently used as a tool for building accountability into program management. Patton (2008) suggests that while this may be a good thing, care must be taken to ensure that indicators reflect the required outcomes:

> *The potential positive contribution of performance monitoring is captured in the mantra that what gets measured gets done. Well-developed and appropriate indicators both focus attention on priority outcomes and provide accountability for achieving those outcomes. The shadow side of performance indicators is that measuring the wrong thing means the wrong thing gets done.* (p. 257)

There is sometimes a perception among program managers that data is numerical evidence. Hence, the kinds of measures frequently used for reporting purposes are largely nominal (and sometimes ordinal) in nature. A quick glance at Appendix 1 confirms this—where almost all of the measures given are represented in a count or percentage of something. Stake and Schwandt (2006) note that quality in evaluation is frequently conceptualised in terms of what is measured:

> *Among the most common measurement constructs associated with judging the quality of the provision and performance of programs and policies are values, goal attainment, effectiveness, efficiency, productivity, functions, treatments, needs, performance outcomes, units, context, input, process, product, dependent and independent variables, side-effects, program theory, program logic, and so forth... These constructs and their measurements are weighted in terms of their importance.* (p. 407)

While there is sometimes a good argument for the simple indicator as a representation of outcomes, often in complex evaluations the apparently simple can be more confusing than clarifying. Skate and Schwandt (2006)make just this point.

> *Representations oversimplify, leave out some aspects of quality in order to signify others, displace the complex with the simple, and so forth. Yet, incompleteness is less a worry than obfuscation. Some representations are just plain confusing.* (p. 414)

Indicators then, need to be carefully thought out from a variety of perspectives before any one (or a set of them) is settled on. For example, the perceptions of 'success' in an intervention can be variously interpreted depending on the point of view taken. Clients, service providers and funders may each have their own view of what success is. Hence, insufficient 'identification of the effects on different groups of program recipients will hide such differences and prevent users of the evaluation findings from considering equity issues' (Hatry and Newcomer 2004:554).

Mixed method approaches are one way of addressing these concerns. Stufflebeam and Shinkfield, in their review of evaluation approaches (Stufflebeam and Shinkfield 2007:189) suggest that it is 'almost always appropriate to consider using a mixed methods approach'.

> *Investigators look to quantitative methods for standardized, replicable findings on large datasets. They look to qualitative methods for elucidation of the program's cultural context, dynamics, meaningful patterns and themes, deviant cases, and diverse impact on individuals as well as groups.* (p. 188)

Evidence and data are not the same. Data collected for an evaluation for example, may ultimately have no meaning or utility. Glasby et al. (2007:434) suggest that 'we need to embrace a broad definition of evidence, which recognises the contribution of different sorts of knowledge to decision making'. They point out that:

> *...the challenge is not one of choosing between different sources of evidence, but of finding ways to synthesise and integrate different types of evidence in a meaningful and practical way to inform decisions...* (p. 434)

According to Glasby et al. evidence that counts for decision making should be based on: theoretical, empirical and experienced evidence. Thus, to have utility, evaluation evidence must be informed by and contribute to theory; it should say what has occurred and how outcomes are perceived. Further, the utility of the evidence must consider the cultural context in which it is both gathered and used. Arney et al (2009), commenting on utilisation of evidence in policy and practice in the Australian child and family welfare sectors acknowledge the importance of policy, practice and research cultures to this end. They omit a further important factor, which is related to the client culture. Evidence for good practice arguably should also address the culture into which interventions are implemented. Briskman (2007:149) alludes to this issue when she says that an important reason for conducting research in Indigenous contexts is to 'have voices heard that have been previously marginalised in the research literature and the public domain'. What Briskman does not say though, is that this form evidence requires some translation—not only in terms of language, but in terms of divergent worldviews. Good evidence from a policy perspective may have absolutely no utility from a local Indigenous perspective.

Evaluations: what makes them complicated or complex?

Evaluations can be divided into those that are simple, those that are complicated and those that are complex. The simplest evaluations could be said to employ a linear logic where causality follows predictably from inputs through to outcomes. Patton (2008:376) suggests that complexity occurs when there is a 'low certainty' about the outcomes that a program will achieve and 'low agreement' about how outcomes should be achieved.

Rogers (2008), following arguments presented by Glouberman and Zimmerman (2002), differentiates between simple, complicated and complex evaluations. Complicated evaluations are those where interdisciplinary and cross-jurisdictional governance structures result in more negotiation is required for agreement on evaluation parameters to occur, there are multiple and simultaneous causal strands, and different causal mechanisms occur

in different contexts. Complex evaluations on the other hand are those where outcomes are achieved through non-linear feedback looks and where outcomes are emergent—and where measures cannot be determined in advance. She suggests that:

> *...it is complex interventions that present the greatest challenge for evaluation and for the utilization of evaluation, because the path to success is so variable and it cannot be articulated in advance. (p. 31)*

Rogers (2008) proposes that for complex interventions an evolving logic model may be required or alternatively 'a series of logic models can be developed alongside development of the intervention, reflecting changes in the understanding' (p. 39).

Complexity however, is not just about predicting outcomes or their causes through a single strand or simultaneous or multiple cause and effect diagrams. Evaluations are also complex because of the context. That is, depending on context, a theory of change model may work well in one context and not in another. Burton et al. (2006:307) suggest a number of context factors that contribute to complexity. These include (among others): History of previous attempts at involvement; the socio-demographic profile; the state of local voluntary and community sector; availability of resources; and timing of interventions.

Further, while at the outset, a program may be envisaged as simple, through the course of implementation, it may become complex. Mason and Barnes (2007) make the point that:

> *Programmes and projects change and develop over time (particularly where an element is participation of users in further design) and, more importantly, it may not be possible to make explicit connections between each element of the change process, no matter how detailed the initial work. It is only once data collection is under way with services, their stakeholders and users that such detail of operation and implementation becomes apparent. Thus, programme theory becomes refined while it is being explored.* (p. 159)

They go on to conclude that this refining process may cause a problem for policy makers wanting to know 'what works' for the sake of building an evidence base. They see the emergent nature of program theory to be a process of knowledge building:

> *Policy-makers should not be looking to evaluators simply to present them with evidence of 'what works', but be open to a dialogue about the way policy initiatives work in practice and to reflect on the consequences of adopting different approaches to achieving positive change.* (p. 168)

We would argue that almost all evaluations carried out in an Indigenous context (as are the SPiL evaluations described here) are necessarily complex. This is in part because of the reasons outlined in the literature above, including the contextual factors pointed out by Mason and Barnes, but more specifically because of the often disparate worldviews of the evaluands, the funding bodies, the evaluators, the auspicing bodies. This issue is raised in the context of multicultural health evaluation in California (Ngoc Nguyen et al. 2003):

> *The cultural value orientations and philosophical worldviews that evaluators bring to a project often determine the whole process of research and evaluation, including: what questions are asked, how programs are designed, what program aspects are evaluated, how effectiveness is assessed, how data are interpreted, and what results are highlighted and disseminated.* (p. 3)

We would argue that application of this understanding goes well beyond the need for 'cultural competence' in evaluation (Botcheva et al. 2009).

What is FAST?

FAST (Families And Schools Together) is an eight-week, early intervention/prevention program, designed to strengthen family functioning and so build protective factors in children. The program targets the whole family and participation is strictly voluntary. It is conducted in the context of a local school. The core of the program involves eight weekly multi-family meetings usually held in the school during which positive interactional experiences for families are structured and facilitated by a collaborative leadership team. The collaborative team consists of at least four members: a parent partner, a school partner, a community-based agency partner, and a community-based partner.

FAST uses modelling and practising in its training of weekly activities accompanied by an explanation of the research background to the activities. Use of a video of other FAST programs has given further visual input of activities. The training manuals, which rely on high English literacy, have been modified for use in remote Indigenous settings. A two day FAST training program for team members allows for checking of activities against local cultural practices, and for planning the first night's program. The training is beneficial to the team members, as it sets them up for the eight week implementation of the program. Once they have completed the eight week process and have participated in evaluation, team members receive certification and accreditation as FAST team members. Once the team experiences a successful program, the confidence of the team members is raised. In particular, parent partners are brought to a level where they gain an interest to pursue further endeavours.

FAST programs grew out of inner city, Native American and First Nation communities in North America. The program was developed by Dr Lynn McDonald, a family therapist and academic at the University of Wisconsin. FAST targeted families with young children who were not succeeding at school. FAST has operated in Australia since 1996, mainly in Victoria and Western Australia, where it included urban Indigenous families. The FAST program's implementation in Territory communities in 2002 was part of a holistic approach to enhance educational outcomes for Indigenous students in that region. The Northern Territory Christian Schools Association (NTCSA) in partnership with local communities established Woolaning Homeland Christian College, a regional, secondary, residential school. From the earliest planning stage, community leaders identified lack of effective parenting as a key impediment to participation and success in schooling. This is supported by *Learning Lessons*, the Collins' Report into Indigenous Education (Northern Territory Department of Education 1999). By the end of 2006 FAST had been delivered to over 11 communities in the Northern Territory.

FAST has been delivered as a part of Anglicare's NT East Arnhem Communities for Children project since 2006. It has been delivered in Numbulwar, Nhulunbuy and Mapuru. In the coming year FAST programs are planned for Ramingining, Yirrkala, Laynhapuy Homelands, Galiwin'ku and Angurugu.

FAST aims to:

1. Enhance Family Functioning.

- Strengthen the parent-child relationship in specific focused ways.
- Empower the parents to help them become the primary prevention agents for their own children.

2. Prevent the Target Child from Experiencing School Failure.

- Improve the child's behaviour and performance in school, both short-term and long-term.
- Empower the parents in their role as partners in the educational process.
- Increase the child's and family's feelings of affiliation toward their school.

3. Prevent Substance Abuse by the Child and Family.

- Increase the family's knowledge and awareness of substance abuse, and the impact of substance abuse upon child development.
- Link the family to appropriate assessment and treatment services, as needed.

4. Reduce the Stress that Parents and Children Experience from Daily Life Situations.

- Develop an ongoing support group for parents of at-risk children.
- Link the family to appropriate community resources and services, as needed.

Build the self-esteem of each family member.

The program uses a strengths-based approach based on family, community and school collaboration. It promotes increasing parental involvement in the child's life, within the family unit, with other parents in the pre-school, with school personnel and with community agency workers. High levels of parent involvement are a critical protective factor for helping children succeed.

FAST is a dynamic process to empower and involve all parents and to foster family development and cohesion. Its ultimate purpose is to help all children succeed at home, in school, and in the community. The core of the program involves eight weekly multi-family meetings usually held in the school during which positive interactional experiences for families are structured and facilitated by a collaborative leadership team. The collaborative team consists of at least four members: a parent partner, a school partner, a community-based agency partner, and a community-based substance abuse partner. Each weekly session includes six key elements, including: 1) a meal shared as a family unit; 2) several communication games played at a family table; 3) time for couples; 4) a self-help parent group; 5) one-to-one quality play, and 6) a fixed lucky door prize in which each family wins once. (Datatab and Burgess 2003:5)

While the basic structure remains the same, in remote Indigenous contexts the program is adapted somewhat to take into account the different cultural dynamics that are present. For example at the Marpuru FAST program, it was not just the immediate family that was involved. Rather, the whole community was engaged in the activities. The programs also need to take into account the possibility that community needs (for example funerals) may from time to time take precedence over the weekly activity. However, because the program is facilitated by trained local people and delivered in local language the immediate relevance of the learning that occurs is not lost in translation. While not discussed in the FAST evidence-base literature, an important feature of the program that may contribute to its effectiveness in remote Indigenous contexts could be that it engages parents with their children in the locus of the community's school. The literature in general supports a view that parent-teacher and parent-school relationships are important for promoting attendance at school and improving school-community outcomes (e.g. Bourke et al. 2000; Mellor and Corrigan 2004; Department of Education Science and Training 2006).

In Indigenous contexts, FAST managers recognise that evaluation strategies based on standardised psychological tests used in other places need to be modified to more accurately reflect the changes that take place. The NT FAST team are currently reviewing their evaluation tools to make them more appropriate. This may involve a higher reliance on qualitative methods than is currently the case.

The international evaluation tool is based on psychometric testing which are designed to assess:

- Social relationships;
- Social support;
- Parental involvement in education;

- Family environment;
- Parental self-efficacy;
- Child strengths and difficulties.

This 'FAST Parent Post Survey' includes 183 questions on these topics.

Evidence for the approach

The efficacy of the approaches used by FAST is supported by a body of literature that includes evaluation and research conducted by FAST itself, internationally (Caspe and Lopez 2006) and within Australia (Coote 2000; Datatab and Burgess 2003; Seiffert 2005; Seiffert 2006) and by other research conducted more generically relating to application of FAST operational principles and practices. These translate into elements of the program model (Wisconsin Center for Education Research 2007) as: a **shared meal; communication games played at a family table, time for couples; a self-help parent group, one-to-one quality play, and a fixed lucky door prize in which each family wins once.** The basis of these activities is drawn from an extensive array of research sources drawn from work carried out up to the early 1990s. The literature cited by FAST (McDonald 2000) describes the importance of parent-child interaction (e.g. Dunst et al. 1988; Gettinger et al. 1992; Webster-Stratton 2002); child-initiated play (e.g. Barkeley 1987); and empowering parents to be involved in their children's learning (e.g. Dunst et al. 1988 also cited in Rous et al. 2003).

The importance of many of these approaches and outcomes is affirmed by the broader body of international evidence relating to investment in early childhood programs (e.g. OECD 2006; UNESCO 2006; Keeley 2007) and national and international literature relating to the need for such programs to address factors impacting on outcomes for disadvantaged families and children (e.g. Centre for Community Child Health and The Smith Family 2004; The Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee 2004; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009). Notable international reports such as the OECD's *Well-being of the Nations* (OECD 2001) and *PISA* reports (e.g. OECD 2003; OECD 2004) highlight the significance and value of early interventions that support parents and young children—particularly those from less advantaged backgrounds.

Overcoming the problem of evaluation

The evaluator was tasked with the challenge of developing a more culturally appropriate tool that also met the evidence and reporting requirements of funders and at the same time was consistent with the outcomes anticipated in the international psychometric tool—which included over 150 questions that would be asked of parents before and after the program. The FAST team had already attempted to develop a simplified tool that reduced the number of questions and simplified the language used but which retained scalar measures of agreement and satisfaction. What they found was that participants found it very difficult to translate the numerical measures that were designed to distinguish between high and low levels of agreement or satisfaction. The meaninglessness of the activity translated into fairly meaningless results that FAST staff were not confident with.

Evaluation tool requirements

The evaluator discussed a range of alternative measurement approaches that might satisfy the mutual requirements of FAST, program participants and funding bodies. The modified tool needed to satisfy a number of criteria. These included:

- **The need for cultural relevance** (that is ideally, the tool would draw on traditional ways of thinking and fit within the frame of reference of remote Indigenous communities—while at the same time recognising the heterogeneity of Indigenous communities);
- **The need for measurable change that reflected the intent of the program** (that is ideally, the tool would be able to report a quantifiable change across a range of indicators);

- **The need for meaningful engagement** (that is, the tool should allow participants to engage in the evaluation activity and relate to what it was attempting to do);
- **The need for easy administration** (ideally, the tool could be administered in language by local people, who could be trained in its use, without requiring any particular qualifications—other than a reasonable grasp of the concepts);
- **The need for measures consistent with the variables included in the international tool** (that is, there should be some correspondence and congruence with the international evaluation instrument); and
- **The need for analysis that would fit in with funder reporting frameworks** (that is, results of analysis should fit in with expectations of funding providers).

It was originally envisaged that the task of creating and designing the tool ready for trialling would take only a few months. However, as the process unfolded a number of complexities slowed the progress. At the time of writing, the tool has undergone several iterations and has been tested unsuccessfully in two contexts. It is now being tested in a third context following further revision.

The process

While the end result of this consultancy is perhaps all important—and will hopefully yield the expected results—the *process* is equally important. The following description tracks the process of nearly 18 months of research and development work.

The process began in June 2008 with the development of a proposal, which included a review of a) the existing evaluation tool, b) the evidence produced to date (in the form of evaluation data and reports), c) the FAST evidence base; d) other tools that had been trialled in remote Indigenous contexts and e) the literature relevant to the proposed work. One of the data collection examples reviewed was 'Patrol Story', a web-based data collection tool designed for use with Remote Area Night Patrol Services. While no longer in existence, the idea of symbol based tools that required relatively low levels of English language literacy and numeracy—which Patrol Story employed—was felt to be a useful model to borrow from.

Having discussed the pros and cons of various approaches to data collection, a workshop was held in Darwin during October 2008 to consider the translation of themes and concepts contained in the international tool into an Indigenous context. The evaluators together with Darwin based staff, and two community-based Indigenous parents went through a process of trying to identify concrete images and meanings that corresponded with the more abstract concepts of the psychometric tool. For example under the heading of 'parental involvement' the workshop concluded that:

> *Parental involvement means outcomes such as:*
>
> - *Parents sitting in classrooms, they get to know the teacher personally.*
> - *Parent participants become team members.*
> - *Team members helped with the picking up of kids for the program.*
>
> *In terms of process it means:*
>
> - *Getting used to the school staff.*
> - *They may be afraid of staff having a go at them and criticised and they don't want to cause a fight.*
> - *Having a community leaders go to go with them to talk to its school staff*
> - *There are employment barriers,.*
> - *And the attitude of staff at the school.*

The workshop also considered crude images of what some of the concepts might look like. Figure 2 and Figure 3, below are how some of these ideas were represented.

Figure 2. Representing schools and parent relationships

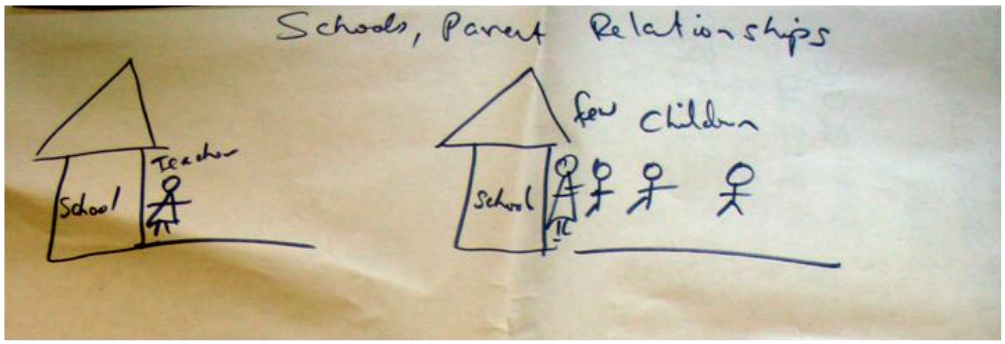
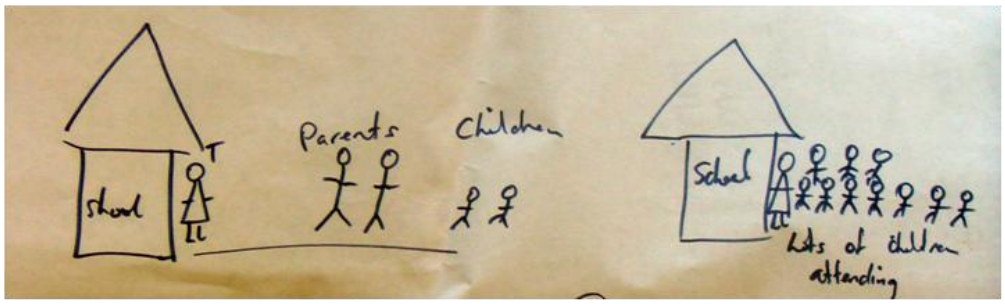
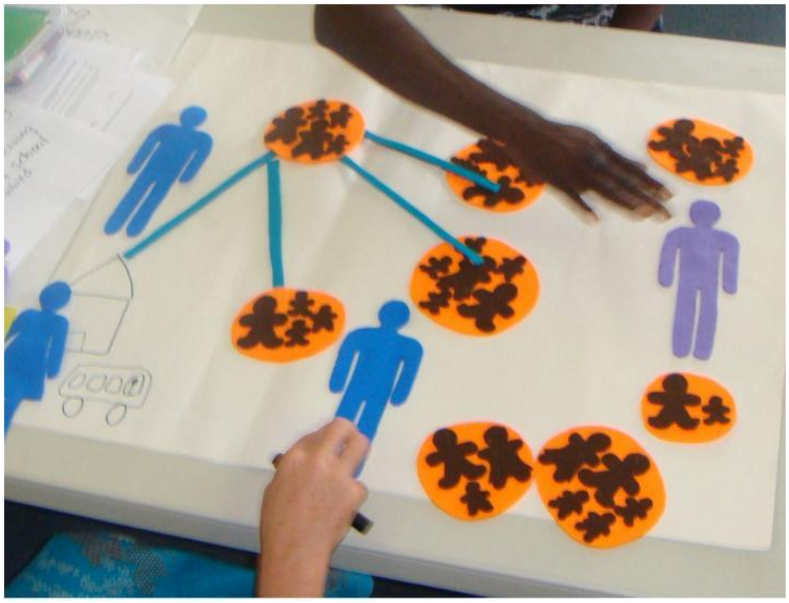


Figure 3.Representing school attendance



The workshop also looked at how processes already embedded in the FAST program—which were known to be effective in remote contexts—could also be used. The use of felt boards, for example, was one approach that was considered. The example shown in Figure 4 is one of the models that was considered at the October 2008 workshop.

Figure 4.Felt board activities used to describe the nature of social relationships

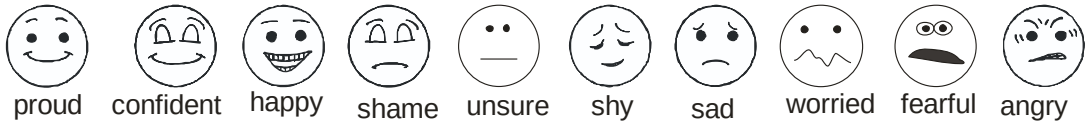


It became evident that these initial rough images needed to be refined and validated before any attempt was made to develop the evaluation tool further. To this end a workshop was held in Alice Springs during December 2008, with a group of Indigenous artists to tease out how the concepts embedded in the international tool might look to complete outsiders. The artists were asked to represent a number of positive and negative concepts in ways that had concrete applications within their cultural frame of reference. Figure 5 is an example of one of several drawings produced.

Figure 5.Artist interpretation of what 'belonging' and not belonging might look like in a community school context

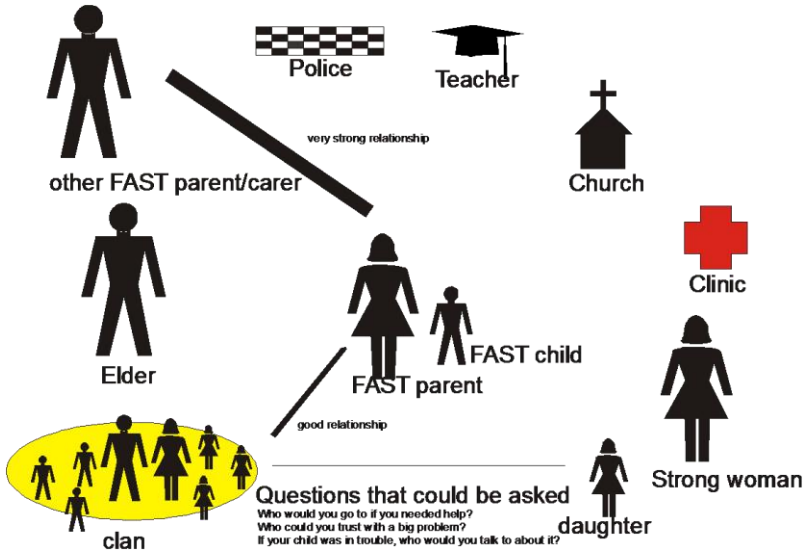
The intent of the evaluators was to have a tool ready for trialling in Term 1 of 2009. Taking all the above into account, a draft tool was developed in January 2009 which incorporated two main types of evaluation activities. The first incorporated a modified set of feeling cards with a series of questions and concrete scenarios that could be used with parents and carers to gauge an emotional response and to test the change in feelings before and after the eight week program. Figure 6 shows the first attempt to develop symbols that could be used to gauge a range of emotional responses. Many of these emotions were already incorporated in FAST activities using what they call 'feeling cards'. The thinking behind the use of these feeling cards is that the program would result in a change in feelings—from less positive to more positive—as a direct result of engagement in the activities.

Figure 6.Initial set of emoticons used to represent feelings



The second set of activities developed, revolved around a felt board where the intent was to identify the extent and strength of relationships held by program participants. Figure 7 shows the initial proposed layout of the felt board activities. Felt board activities were to be recorded with a digital camera.

Figure 7.Initial design of felt board activity



A recording sheet was also developed in conjunction with these activities so that results could be recorded ready for collation and analysis. The initial tool underwent several iterative changes as the time for trialling approached. The first trials were conducted in April 2009 at Kalano community, near Katherine and at Pine Creek (between Katherine and Darwin). The results of these trials were mixed. The Pine Creek results unfortunately included no results from Indigenous participants. The process at Kalano did produce some results—though the team were not too confident about the findings—but a number of lessons were learned. The evaluator present observed that:

- The evaluation process was quite time consuming and some of the scenarios that were proposed, did not fit the local context;
- The tool was trialled with a group including several families in one instance but this was problematic because not all family members had an equal voice;
- Some people who indicated an intent to participate in the FAST program and who completed the 'pre-evaluation tool' did not then go on to participate (and some who participated did not join in the evaluation); and
- The local coordinator was not fully confident in using the tool and was therefore not confident about its use.

Despite the limitations noted, the before and after results, did show measurable changes in feelings, though in some cases the feelings appeared to be more negative after the program than before. On reflection it was felt that the negative change may have been a result of the increased awareness that emerged as a result of participating in the program. For example, while some parents may have expressed a feeling that 'everything was fine' before the program, the experience may have led to a more honest reflection of the situation they faced. The Kalano and Pine Creek trials concluded in June 2008.

Further trialling of the tool was held up to some extent by difficulties experienced by the FAST team as they negotiated with local communities. For example, an intended trial of the tools at Angurugu in August 2009 had to be aborted because of problems within the local team and the community. The next program was then scheduled for Yirrkala, to commence in October 2009. Discussions with the FAST team and the evaluators led to a further refinement of the tool in September 2009. The process was streamlined further, questions were adapted and tested again, the range of emotional responses was changed and the felt-board activities were adjusted. Definitions and examples of the various emotional responses were added to give consistency to the tool's administration.

The Yirrkala FAST program is currently underway and should be completed by December 2009. The pre-evaluation trial has been conducted. The process itself ran more smoothly than it did at Kalano and it is expected now that local team members will be able to carry. However, some issues again hampered the process:

- As with the Kalano trial, some parents who said they would join the program, did not then follow through; and
- Organising time to meet with parents to conduct the evaluation, proved time consuming and difficult for the Darwin based staff member.

However, there was considerably more comfort with the process than before. Staff were able navigate through the tool's 19 questions more easily and were able to pre-empt issues that may have otherwise been insurmountable before. The tool's revisions meant that the sequence of activities ran more logically and they found that participants were more engaged in the process and were willing to discuss in some depth the issues that the questions raised.

So what has been learned?

What was intended to be a six month project has extended to a 15 month process—and is still yet to be completed. This has been a little frustrating for all concerned. However, while it would have been possible to produce a tool after six months it would have invariably failed because of insufficient time for testing. *Allowing time for processes to take place* is therefore an important lesson learned from this project.

It is quite obvious that evaluations of this kind are unfamiliar to staff and participants. While non-Indigenous staff are quite comfortable with the idea of a tool that asks 'tick the box' questions, they are not so familiar with evaluation processes that draw out emotional responses to issues. The foreignness of this requires some getting used to for administrators—as does the time it takes to administrate such tools. However, as was observed at Yirrkala, the level of engagement among participants in this process—which allows for stories to be told and responses to be negotiated—is perhaps not so foreign. *It is evident however, that those administering tools of this kind, need to be trained and practice using the tools.*

The problem of people agreeing to participate in the program and join in the initial evaluation process before the program—and then not attending—may require a pragmatic response. If, as has been the experience, the attrition rate at the beginning of the program is in the order of 50 per cent, it may be necessary to recruit a larger number of participants, and then extend the pre-evaluation process into the first two weeks of the program. *Administration of evaluation tools of this kind require a degree of flexibility that would not otherwise be required in mainstream settings.*

While this requirement for flexibility is acknowledged, it leads to a further problem. If administration of the instrument is dependent on trained Darwin based staff, the cost and time commitment required for the process, probably needs to be doubled, to allow for the extra time. *To overcome the cost and time issues, it may be necessary to focus attention on training team members within the remote community to administer the evaluation tool.* Finding the right person can of course sometimes be a problem, but the evaluator noted that at least in Yirrkala there were team members who could be trained for this purpose. Of course, training and support for these people has its own cost, which should not be underestimated.

All of the preceding discussion is premised on the assumption that the process works and the results will produce the desired outcomes. It is one thing to develop a tool that can be administered. It is another to extract meaningful data from these tools. While the initial results appear promising, the evaluators are conscious of the need to validate the results over time. One set of data in itself will not be enough to ensure that the data will provide the kinds of outcomes expected by FAST and funders. *The proof will be in the analysis of the data over a longer period of time.*

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to document the findings to date of a project designed to develop a set of evaluation tools for use in remote contexts by FAST. The project has taken considerably longer than anticipated and the results are 'not yet in the bag'. There is no guarantee, even after 15 months of trialling, that the tool developed—which is arguably more culturally appropriate than a 183 question psychometric tool—will yield the desired outcomes. However, the process used has been constructive and valuable learnings have been generated from the project.

The project has shown that a) it is possible to engage participants in a meaningful way, in an evaluation process; and b) program outcomes can be measured in ways other than simplistic quantitative measures or overly complex qualitative methods. This is a kind of hybrid tool that allows for qualitative data to be translated into more definitive outcomes, which can then be reported in a form that will be understood by funders. The proof though, will be in the analysis, which will require careful review and considered interpretation.

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