

EFFECTIVE INTERNAL EVALUATION FOR IMPROVEMENT



Effective Internal Evaluation for improvement

Published 2016

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ISBN 978-0-478-43849-9



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Introduction

This overview of the processes and reasoning involved in effective internal evaluation for improvement draws on a recently published resource *Effective Internal Evaluation – How to do and use internal evaluation for improvement (2015)*.¹

This resource was jointly published by the Education Review Office and the Ministry of Education. Section Two of the resource – “Engaging in effective internal evaluation” describes both the ‘how to’ and the evaluative thinking that contributes to improvement. As these processes and associated reasoning can be used in many different evaluation contexts and settings we decided to publish this overview so more people could access and make use of this information. You might be a school board of trustees, the management committee of an early learning service, or a leader, teacher or member of a community of learning. This resource could also be used by community organisations interested in internal evaluation for improvement.

1 See: <http://www.ero.govt.nz/publications/effective-school-evaluation/>

Engaging in effective internal evaluation

Evaluation is the engine that drives improvement and innovation. Internal evaluation is undertaken to assess what is and is not working, and for whom, and then to determine what changes are needed, particularly to advance equity and excellence goals. Internal evaluation involves asking good questions, gathering fit-for-purpose data and information, and then making sense of that information. Much more than a technical process, evaluation is deeply influenced by your values and those of your community. Effective internal evaluation is always driven by the motivation to improve.

When internal evaluation is done well, processes are coherent and align with your vision and strategic goals. You work collaboratively to ensure that the efforts that go into evaluation lead to improvement. The urgency to improve is shared, and can be articulated, by all.

Evidence from research shows that there are organisational conditions that support development of the capacity to do and use evaluation for improvement and innovation.

These include:

- > evaluation leadership
- > a learning-oriented community of professionals that demonstrates agency in using evaluation for improvement in practice and outcomes
- > opportunity to develop technical evaluation expertise (including access to external expertise)
- > access to, and use of, appropriate tools and methods
- > systems, processes and resources that support purposeful data gathering, knowledge building and decision making.

Scope, depth and focus

Internal evaluations vary greatly in scope, depth and focus depending on the purpose and the context. An evaluation may be strategic, linked to vision, values, goals and targets; or it may be a business-as-usual review of, for example, policy or procedures. It could also be a response to an unforeseen (emergent) event or issue.

Figure 1 shows how these different purposes can all be viewed as part of a common improvement agenda.

FIGURE 1. TYPES OF INTERNAL EVALUATION



Strategic evaluation

Strategic evaluations focus on activities related to your vision, values and goals.

They aim to find out to what extent your vision is being realised, goals achieved, and progress made. Strategic evaluations are a means of answering such key questions as: To what extent are all our learners experiencing success? To what extent are improvement initiatives making a difference for all learners? How can we do better? Because strategic evaluations delve into matters, they need to be in-depth and they take time.

Regular evaluation

Regular (planned) evaluations are business-as-usual evaluations or inquiries where data is gathered, progress towards goals is monitored, and the effectiveness of programmes or interventions is assessed. They ask: To what extent do our policies and practices promote the learning and wellbeing of all learners? How fully have we implemented the policies we have put in place to improve outcomes for all learners? How effective are our strategies for accelerating the progress of target learners? Business-as-usual evaluations vary in scope and depth and feed back into your strategic and annual plans.

Emergent evaluation

Emergent (or spontaneous) evaluations are a response to an unforeseen event or an issue picked up by routine scanning or monitoring. Possible focus questions include: What is happening? Who for? Is this okay? Should we be concerned? Why? Do we need to take a closer look? Emergent evaluations arise out of high levels of awareness about what is happening.

To think about and discuss

- > What is the focus of our evaluations?
- > Do we use all three types of evaluation (strategic, regular and emergent)?
- > In what areas could we improve our understanding and practice of evaluation?
- > How do we ensure that all evaluation supports our vision, values and strategic goals?
- > How do we ensure that all evaluation promotes equitable outcomes for learners?

FIGURE 2. LEARNER-FOCUSED EVALUATION PROCESSES AND REASONING



Processes and reasoning

Internal evaluation requires those involved to engage in deliberate, systematic processes and reasoning, with improved outcomes for all learners as the ultimate aim. Those involved collaborate to:

- > investigate and scrutinise practice
- > analyse data and use it to identify priorities for improvement
- > monitor implementation of improvement actions and evaluate their impact
- > generate timely information about progress towards goals and the impact of actions taken.

Figure 2 identifies five interconnected, learner-focused processes that are integral to effective evaluation for improvement.

Figures 3 to 7 unpack each of these processes in terms of the conditions that support their effectiveness, the reasoning involved, and the activities or actions involved.



FIGURE 3.
NOTICING

When noticing

- We maintain a learner focus
- We are aware of what is happening for all learners
- We have an 'inquiry habit of mind'
- We are open to scrutinising our data
- We see dissonance and discrepancy as opportunities for deeper inquiry

We ask ourselves

- What's going on here?
- For which learners?
- Is this what we expected?
- Is this good?
- Should we be concerned? Why?
- What is the problem or issue?
- Do we need to take a closer look?



Noticing involves

- Scanning
- Being aware of hunches, gut reactions and anecdotes
- Knowing when to be deliberate and intentional
- Recognising the context and focus for evaluation – strategic, regular or emergent

"If the results don't look good we need to be honest about them"
"Knowing what the problem is, is critical"

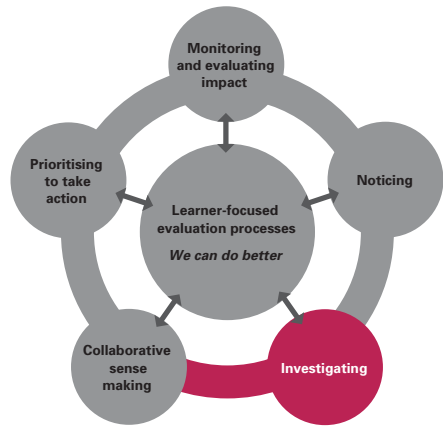


FIGURE 4.
INVESTIGATING

When investigating

- We focus on what is happening for *all* our learners
- We ensure we have sufficient data to help us respond to our questions
- We check that our data is fit-for-purpose
- We actively seek learners and parents' perspectives
- We check we know about all learners in different situations

We ask ourselves

- What do we already know about this?
- How do we know this?
- What do we need to find out?
- How might we do this?
- What 'good questions' should we ask?
- How will we gather relevant and useful data'?

Investigating

Investigating involves

- Taking stock
- Bringing together what we already know (data/information)
- Using existing tools or developing new ones to gather data
- Identifying relevant sources of data/evidence
- Seeking different perspectives

"We make sure that we include the voices and perspectives of children and their whānau."



FIGURE 5.
COLLABORATIVE SENSE MAKING

When making sense of our data and information

We ensure we have the necessary capability (data literacy) and capacity (people/time)

We are open to new learning

We know 'what is so' and have determined 'so what'

We know what 'good' looks like so that we can recognise our strengths and areas for improvement

We have a robust evidence base to inform our decision making and prioritising

We ask ourselves

What is our data telling us/what insights does it provide?

Is this good enough?

How do we feel about what we have found?

Do we have different interpretations of the data? If so, why?

What might we need to explore further?

What can we learn from research evidence about what 'good' looks like?

How close are we to that?

Collaborative sense making

Collaborative sense making involves

Scrutinising our data with an open mind

Working with different kinds of data, both quantitative and qualitative

Drawing on research evidence and using suitable frameworks or indicators when analysing and making sense of our data

"We want to know what's good – and what's not good enough"

"To effect change, teachers needed to be on board – it was not going to be a two-meeting process"

"What are we doing well? What can we improve on? How can we enrich and accelerate the learning of our learners?"



FIGURE 6.
PRIORITISING TO TAKE ACTION

When prioritising to take action

We are clear what problem or issue we are trying to solve

We understand what we need to improve

We are determined to achieve equitable progress and outcomes for all learners

We are clear about the actions we need to take and why

We have the resources necessary to take action

We have a plan that sets out clear expectations for change

We ask ourselves

What do we need to do and why?

What are our options?

Have we faced this situation before?

What can we do to ensure better progress and outcomes for more of our learners?

How big is the change we have in mind?

Can we get the outcomes we want within the timeframe we have specified?

What strengths do we have to draw on/build on?

What support/resources might we need?

Prioritising to take action

Prioritising to take action involves

Considering possible options in light of the 'what works' evidence

Being clear about what needs to change and what doesn't

Identifying where we have the capability and capacity to improve

Identifying what external expertise we might need

Prioritising our resources to achieve equitable outcomes

"Prioritising is based on having capacity – you can't stretch yourself too far"

"Everything we have done has been based on the evidence"

"We are about wise owls not bandwagons"

"Everything we've done has been decided with data, both quantitative and qualitative"

"If we keep doing the same things we will keep getting the same results"

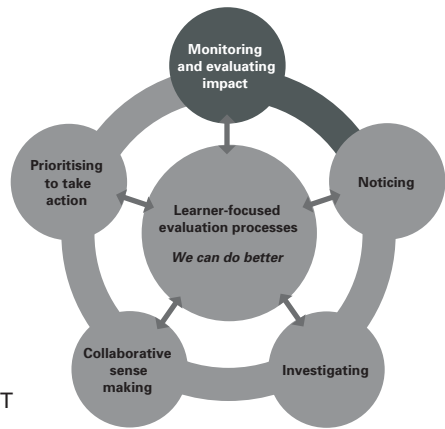


FIGURE 7.
MONITORING AND EVALUATING IMPACT

When monitoring and evaluating

- We know what we are aiming to achieve
- We are clear about how we will monitor progress
- We know how we will recognise progress
- We are focused on ensuring *all* learners have equitable opportunities to learn
- We have the capability and capacity to evaluate the impact of our actions

We ask ourselves

- What is happening as a result of our improvement actions?
- What evidence do we have?
- Which of our learners are/are not benefiting?
- How do we know?
- Is this good enough?
- Do we need to adjust what we are doing?
- What are we learning?
- Can we use this learning in other areas?

Monitoring and evaluating impact

Monitoring and evaluating involves

- Keeping an eye on the data for evidence of what is/is not working for all learners
- Having systems, processes and tools in place to track progress and impact
- Developing progress markers that will help us to know whether we are on the right track
- Checking in with learners and their parents and whānau
- Knowing when to adjust or change actions or strategies

“Success is still fragile – if you have a group (that is not achieving to expectations) you focus on them and keep focusing on them”

Why not start a discussion about what each of the five evaluation processes might mean in your own organisation? This will clarify your thinking about evaluation and evaluation practices and help identify areas where you need to develop greater capability or capacity.

To think about and discuss

- > What processes do we currently use for the purposes of evaluation and review?
- > How do our processes reflect those described above?
- > Which parts of these processes do we do well? How do we know?
- > How might we use the processes described above to improve the quality and effectiveness of our evaluation practice?

Effective evaluation requires us to think deeply about the data and information we gather and what it means in terms of priorities for action. By asking the right questions of ourselves, we will keep the focus on our learners, particularly those for whom current practice is not working. The twin imperatives of excellence and equitable outcomes should always be front and centre whatever it is that we are evaluating.

While every community's improvement is unique, it can be described under these four headings:

- > Context for improvement
- > Improvement actions taken
- > Shifts in practice
- > Outcomes for learners.

The framework on the following page shows how the evaluation and reasoning processes are integral to, and an embedded part of, ongoing improvement for equity and excellence.

Using evaluation processes and reasoning for improvement

Context for improvement

Every context is different. It may be that the appointment of a new leader provides the catalyst for change. It may be that external evaluators, by posing 'stop and think' questions, motivate leaders and teachers to evaluate aspects of practice to improve outcomes.

Whatever the context, engaging in evaluation for improvement is motivated by the need to make changes that will have a positive impact on the learning and wellbeing of all learners. Such change is sustained by the belief that we can do better.

NOTICING

What's going on here? For which learners?
Is this what we expected?
Is this good?
Should we be concerned? *Why?*
What is the problem or issue?
Do we need to take a closer look?



INVESTIGATING

What do we already know about this?
How do we know this?
What do we need to find out?
How might we do this?
What 'good questions' should we ask?
How will we gather relevant and useful data'?

IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS

- > Improvement actions emerge out of collaborative sense making processes. Consideration needs to be given to whether there is the internal capability to forge ahead with the necessary changes or whether external expertise is needed. Good decisions at this point rely heavily on leaders knowing what it takes to bring about significant educational change.
- > Capability building is often high on the list when it comes to improvement actions. Leaders and teachers need to have the skills and knowledge they need to make the desired changes. The way in which they collaborate is a crucial aspect of any improvement endeavour that seeks better outcomes for learners.



PRIORITISING TO TAKE ACTION

- What do we need to do and why?
- What are our options?
- Have we faced this situation before?
- What can we do to ensure better progress and outcomes for more of our learners?
- How big is the change we have in mind?
- Can we get the outcomes we want within the timeframe we have specified?
- What strengths do we have to draw on/build on?
- What support/resources might we need?

SHIFTS IN PRACTICE

By monitoring the implementation of improvement actions and evaluating their impact, those involved come to learn what works or does not work, for which learners, and why. The biggest shifts are those that penetrate to the core of teaching practice. Shifts in the conditions that support effective evaluation will contribute to shifts in teaching practice

From

To



COLLABORATIVE SENSE MAKING

- What is our data telling us/what insights does it provide?
- Is this good enough?
- How do we feel about what we have found?
- Do we have different interpretations of the data? If so, why?
- What might we need to explore further?
- What can we learn from research evidence about what 'good' looks like? How close are we to that?

OUTCOMES FOR LEARNERS

Effective internal evaluation processes enable those involved to better understand:

- > how individual learners and groups of learners are progressing in relation to valued outcomes
- > how improvement actions taken have impacted on learner outcomes and what difference is being made
- > what needs to be changed and what further action needs to be taken
- > the patterns and trends in outcomes over time
- > what kinds of practices are likely to make the most difference for diverse learners and in what contexts
- > the extent to which the improvements achieved are good enough in achieving priorities for equity and excellence.



