Rapid Cycle Evaluation: Evidence Paper

Making the best of your early years service system

Early Years Initiative

Contents

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1. Background and Aims

1.1 Why has this evidence paper been written?

This evidence paper is a collation of the evidence base underpinning the EYSIT Guide which has been written for communities involved in the Early Years Initiative (EYI). This evidence paper describes an approach to *rapid cycle evaluation* suggested for EYI communities.[1] The overarching goal of this project, as stated in the EYI Business Case, is to:

> *Improve the health, learning and development of children from conception to age four by designing, testing and evaluating place-based initiatives within low socio-economic communities.*

Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock (2017) refer to the ingredients in this process as simple: "targeted actions are rapidly tried, lessons are quickly gathered to inform what happened and why, and a next action step is designed and undertaken based on what was learned in the prior step" (p. 170). They argue small rapid "experiments" can offer "*Goldilocks*" solutions, with changes attempted that are not *too big, not too small, not too slow, but just right*. Being 'just right' means quick, low cost actions that can be adjusted to allow early successes or "quick wins" (Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock, 2017).

Quick wins are important because children from socially and economically disadvantaged areas tend to have poorer physical health, less access to learning materials from infancy, and are less likely to access material and cultural resources than their counterparts in more affluent areas. Moreover,

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[1] Some of the '*nuts and bolt*s' of the approach outlined in a later section of this paper have been drawn from the *Data to Action* model, which was developed by the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) for an initiative that shares a range of characteristics with the EYI. Other elements in the approach have been derived from a publication on program evaluation produced by the NSW Office of Public Management (n.d.) and from a variety of sources within what is broadly known as Design Thinking or Human Centred Design.

minority-group parents are less likely to access health and educational resources for their children (Cochran, 2011).

1.2 What problem does rapid cycle evaluation seek to address?

Children from families experiencing poverty are less likely to be developmentally ready to commence school and the gap between them and their counterparts persists across the school years and translates into other forms of disadvantage across the life course. Community based services are one of the obvious ways in which our society can work with families to remedy some of this relative disadvantage. But this is dependent on these services being acceptable and accessible to those with the greatest needs. While the issues entwined with this are various and complex, it is clear that when higher needs families do access community-based health and educational resources, they are more likely to do so later, meaning that problems like developmental delays are often more serious and less amenable to treatment. This characterisation fits with the picture of Australian children from low SES areas getting a relatively poorer start in life and more likely to be developmentally vulnerable at school entry (Simons, 2011).

> *Research suggests that population-level outcome change for vulnerable children will not result from implementing single programs, but rather from portfolios of strategies that are tailored to suit the needs of individual communities.*

Put simply, as in many areas of life, there are no *'silver bullet solutions'* to remedying childhood vulnerability. This is because there are a range of possible ways social and economic disadvantage links with a poorer start to life. As each child and family are different, what may 'work' for one situation may be less effective for others. So, instead of looking for single solutions, we need comprehensive approaches, which according to Bradley and Corwyn (2002) means services and families need to work closely together to bolster:

- child-level skills (e.g. coping skills and communication);
- family-level skills (e.g. parenting skills); and
- links between one-another (e.g. cohesion and shared values between school and childcare centres).

By broadening and extending capacity to support the well-being of all children in disadvantaged communities, the chances of developmental risks having substantial impacts on life chances are minimised. This *comprehensive* approach is the goal of the EYI.

1.3 What contribution will rapid cycle evaluation make to an early years service system?

A comprehensive suite of integrated family-community-service responses to locally identified challenges is at the core of the Theory of Change for the EYI. The goal is to support local community capacity to optimise early childhood development. In each site, researchers will work alongside communities to design, test and evaluate evidence-informed service delivery models. Communities can expect active support from the different levels of government, researchers, the business sector and philanthropic organisations.

> *A comprehensive approach in EYI communities will help deliver:*
>
> - *Improved service coordination and user choice;*
> - *More active community engagement in designing initiatives that support young children and their families;*
> - *Better access at a community level to evidence about "what works" to improve early childhood outcomes; and, most importantly*
> - *Increased understanding about the best mix of community and service actions to support all WA families to optimise the development and wellbeing of their children.*

In the long-term, our intention is for all children in WA to start school on a more even playing field, so that the link between '*postcode*' and disadvantage is weakened. As we learn how to do this, we will share our experiences across Australia and more broadly.

1.4 What ideas underpin rapid cycle evaluation?

The idea of rapid cycle evaluation rests on four principles outlined by Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock (2013). They suggest that to solve complex social problems, there needs to be the people, skills, expertise and funding needed to generate, test and refine local responses to locally identified and prioritised areas for change. Moreover, they point to the importance of having systems that support *'experimentation'*.

Their four principles are:

1. **Develop local solutions for local problems**

   Transition from predetermined solutions to allowing local nomination, articulation and prioritisation of concrete challenges to be addressed.

2. **Push problem-driven 'positive deviance'**

   Create (and protect) environments within and across organisations that encourage experimentation and change. 'Positive deviance' refers to being willing to challenge the normal approaches for the sake of achieving beneficial outcomes.

3. **Try, learn, iterate, adapt**

   Promote active experiential (and experimental) learning with evidence-driven feedback built into regular management that allows for real-time adaptation.

4. **Scale through diffusion**

   Engage champions across sectors and organisations who ensure reforms are viable, legitimate and relevant.

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The literature out of Design Thinking provides another, more generative approach than one that has traditionally focused on finding 'solutions' to 'problems'. Design Thinking has gained significant traction in practice, including by global management agencies and in systems change initiatives, however, there is less methodologically rigorous study of these approaches than may be expected (Liedtka, 2017). Within this body of work, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a key, strengths-based approach that has been used in a wide range of organisational and inter-organisational contexts over the last thirty years (D. L. Cooperrider, 1987; D. L. Cooperrider, Zandee, D. P., Godwin, L. N., Avital, M., & Boland, B. , 2013; Fry, 2014) and for which there is a comparatively strong research base. It is an iterative journey through the 4-Ds of Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny:

1. Discovery

Jointly exploring and sharing stories about the occasions when the organisation or system was functioning at its best.

2. Dream

Using the stories shared through the discovery process as a base, jointly imagining what the future could be like.

3. Design

Jointly designing lots of 'prototypes' to quickly test whether these could contribute to bringing the imagined future into reality.

4. Destiny

Implementing the prototypes, testing these, learning throughout the process and constantly innovating.

It is important to note that using AI does not exclude addressing negative issues but rather provides an approach that opens up possibilities and does so with everyone involved (Cooperrider et al., 2013). This approach makes explicit that the questions that are asked during an inquiry will impact

on the dynamics of the relationships of those involved as well as the directions that are explored. "You find what you ask for" (Grieten, Lambrechts, Bouwen et al, 2018, p. 104). The distinction between inquiry (identifying the 'problem') and intervention (possible 'solutions') breaks down; or rather they are seen as two sides of the same coin (Grieten, Lambrechts, Bouwen et al, 2018, p. 103).

Along with these principles, the notion of rapid cycle evaluation described in this guide has been informed by previous research by Telethon Kids Institute that explored collaboration among early years services and professionals in WA communities and by other literature on place-based early years initiatives. The WA research looking at both Early Years Networks (EYN's) and subsequently, early years service integration, along with work in community settings, highlighted that when it is achieved, collaboration can help coalface staff better understand their local service system and build capacity to help local families address their needs. This research also pointed to challenges and constraints on collaboration and reinforced that successful collaboration often depended on a distinctive set of organisational characteristics to scaffold and progress these initiatives.

There are many frameworks that categorise the of ways of working across organisations. The "3Cs" model was developed by Keast, Brown and Mandell (2007) following investigation of how these terms were commonly used within the human services sector in Australia. They summarise respondents' views of the attributes of cooperation, coordination and collaboration. They describe *cooperation* as the "base level" that requires that "organizations simply take each other's goals into account and try to accommodate these" (p. 17). *Coordination* is described as "working to a common goal [without] a loss of individual autonomy" in an "instrumentalist" manner (p. 18). Finally, *collaboration* is characterised by Keast et al. as the most integrated of the three with a potential "blurring of the boundaries of individual agencies" (p. 19). To achieve the objectives envisioned within the EYI, collaborative practice will be required within each community. Collaboration is underpinned by "shared goals, joint dialogue and a higher level of trust" (p.19).

Traditional ways of working are anathema to collaboration. This makes it much more challenging than regular approaches, however, 'wicked problems' such as developing an integrated early childhood system are impervious to either cooperation or coordination.

WA research into early years service collaborations echoes aspects of the national literature on place-based early years initiatives. Hogan, Rubenstein and Fry (Centre for Community Child Health, 2018) have distilled the findings from this literature into general principles suggesting the key elements include:

1. **Cross-sector decision-making partnerships**, with residents, community organisations, government representatives and service providers joining together with authority to make decisions;
2. **Skilled day-to-day support with evaluation**, planning and change management;
3. **Active commitment to identify and deepen understanding** of local issues, establish priorities, strengthen relationships and trust, and build collective efficacy;
4. **A process for evaluating and rapidly improving** services; and
5. **Capacity building to foster collaborative mindsets and practices** and the skills to build a groundswell of willingness to embrace early years service reform across the broader community environment.

A critical review of literature on interorganisational networks by Popp, MacKean, Casebeer, Milward, and Lindstrom's (2016) drew some similar and some complementary conclusions. They reinforced the important role of trust. Trust is a lubricant for local collaboration, commitment and effectiveness. Along with this, they referred to challenges in collaboration including achieving consensus on purpose and goals, addressing cultural differences across organisations, the desire for professional autonomy, coordination fatigue and power differences.

To deal with these challenges, Popp et al. (2016) pointed to a need for the management and leadership of collaborations to be organic and dispersed.

This suggests that collaborations may need facilitation more than they do coordination or coordinators.

Related to this seems that, to be effective, people within collaborations must resolve how they balance their own organisational demands with the cross-cutting or systems-level needs that are critical if local families are to be offered an early years system that coheres around their needs. Achieving this balance can pose major challenges to traditional siloed models of service delivery and the related issue of lines of accountability. This sacrificing of some level of organisational autonomy is addressed by Keast et al (2007).

Nevertheless, it is clearly possible, and people clearly manage it, in ways that suit their own skills and circumstances. Thus, Andrews et al. (2017) reinforce the many different roles needed for effective reforms, noting that initiatives that have worked well:

- provided formal authority for change;
- inspired others and motivated change;
- recognised the problems that needed change;
- supplied ideas for solutions;
- provided resources to start change;
- offered practical support and encouragement;
- contributed realistic implementation advice; and
- provided access to community and service networks.

While it is acknowledged that human service reforms are *easier said than done,* the *architecture* of the EYI is intended to help resolve some of the common challenges. Within this *architecture*, helping

to build and sustain local capacity to undertake rapid cycle evaluations is expected to help communities to deal with some of the previously-mentioned challenges and to build dispersed capacity for local early years system improvement.

1.5 Defining terms

Mathematica Policy Research[2] (2017) defines rapid cycle evaluation as "a process for testing changes to program operations and services to quickly know whether and for whom the change caused its intended improvement" (p.1). To further clarify meaning, *rapid* refers to quick identification of results, usually within a few months, *cycle* refers to a focus on continuous improvement and evaluation refers to use of '*good enough*' measures to assess the impact of changes and identify links between the cause and the change observed. [3]
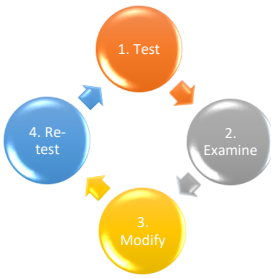
Collins (2014) stresses that *people* and *relationships* lie at the heart of rapid cycle evaluation: building a shared understanding of what is most important to those receiving the services through *open conversations* and an appreciation of a "collective intelligence". This mirrors the strengths-based approach of the EYI initiative, which recognises that the capacity to discover and apply solutions to immediate challenges usually stems from the ground up.

Other commonly used terminology includes *prototyping* (D. L. Cooperrider, Zandee, D. P., Godwin, L. N., Avital, M., & Boland, B. , 2013; Scharmer, 2018) which refers to a multitude of jointly imagined approaches that are trialled with a view to learn about their suitability for delivering on the *intention* of those involved. Prototypes are not pilots, but rather '*safe to fail*' experiments. The

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[2] **Figure 1**: Mathematica Policy Research: The Rapid Cycle Evaluation process (2016)

amount of time, money and emotional energy invested is much less than for a *pilot* – the intent is to learn rather than to solve a problem with one solution. Approaches which appear to be useful are further refined and built upon while those that are not are quickly discarded. Of note, there are no repercussions for dispensing with a prototype. They are 'safe' for all involved being quick, free or cheap and very low risk.

Importantly, rapid cycle evaluation is offered as a *systems-level* quality improvement process. Given this, it is useful to first describe what quality might mean in a community's early years system.

2. Achieving a Place-Based Systems-Level Culture of Quality
2.1 What is an Early Years System?

Pursuing quality improvement in a community *early years system* requires consistency of purpose across diverse and multi-stakeholder arrangements. Figure 1 points to the complexity of these *systems*, which in WA generally span healthcare, learning and development, family support, schooling, material wellbeing and so on. A recent WA Government *Service Priority Review* (October, 2017) and the Australian Productivity Commission's *Reforms to Human Services* (March, 2018) suggested a need for significant changes to build more collaboration between government, community and the business sector. This will mean enhancing the quality of community engagement across the State to enable a sharper focus on the needs of children and families within their community settings.

Similarly, in its assessment that family and community services are not always effective at meeting the needs of people experiencing hardship, the Australian Productivity Commission (2018) called for user choice to be put "at the heart of service provision" (p. 2). It is envisaged that this will be at least partially achieved by increasing the frequency and quality of evaluations. Consequently, the use of rapid cycle evaluation for quality improvement aligns with these wider State and National policy and community systems reforms.

Figure 1: Early Years in Western Australia (Department of Communities, 2017)

Given the breadth of *Early Years Systems* reflected in Figure 1*,* quality will tend to mean different things to the different people who work within and use its various aspects (Mathers, Singler & Karemaker, 2012). Further, given the community orientation of the EYI and the expectation of high levels of community input into program and service design, developing shared views of '*quality'* will be a foundational conversation.

For this reason, it is useful to briefly touch on Cottle's (2013) advice that the cornerstone of work in this area should be to build a *culture* that fosters the pursuit of excellence by which we mean one that is flexible, dynamic and inclusive, encouraging of debate and challenge, and with openness to change. The accompanying guide reflects Cottle's (2013) aspiration.

2.2 The goal of cross-cutting quality collaborations for local Early Years Systems

The intended focus of rapid cycle evaluation is:

> *systemic or community-wide, rather than being limited to a specific service, a group of professionals or a single organisation. The emphasis will be to create 'cross-cutting' collaborations in EYI communities, inclusive of all groups that have a stake in the quality of early years services and that can accommodate their distinct views of local issues and needs.*

This distinguishes the current approach from internal organisational efforts to address the quality of their services.

The goal of a 'cross-cutting' community-wide quality collaboration is to have a "locally-determined, dynamic quality improvement process" (Cottle, 2013), which is especially responsive to the needs of vulnerable families and their children. This is the group for who developmental outcomes are generally going to be poorest and whose engagement with the early years system will often be quite limited. A key element of the rapid cycle evaluation could be to deeply understand why families are

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choosing not to engage with services. Platforms, developed by Murdoch Children's Research Institute, works with services to unpack this. See: https://www.rch.org.au/ccch/research-projects/Platforms/

A starting point could be:

> *The highest possible levels of parental participation are achieved in community programs and services that help to prevent developmental delays, protect and promote child and family wellbeing, identify issues as early as possible and offer appropriate and holistic intervention at the right time, in the right place and in the right way.*

Creating broad, cooperative cultures of openness and innovation that can transcend different service systems and professions is a priority of the EYI. This capability is increasingly recognised as important in 21st century systems (Choi & Pak, 2006). The dimensions and tools required to achieve these aims are shown in Figure 2.

Obviously, a prerequisite to achieving this culture is establishing the commitment of the different groups to be involved and understanding at what stage of co-working they are operating. This is particularly important among agency leaders, but it is also vital that frontline staff are supportive of collective decision-making. Among the known barriers to this are the desire for organisational and professional autonomy. Consequently, *start-up* attempts at rapid cycle evaluation capacity need to invest in building trust, ensuring commitment and resolving points of difference before starting on the 'real' work. Applying the principles of AI can rapidly speed up this process.
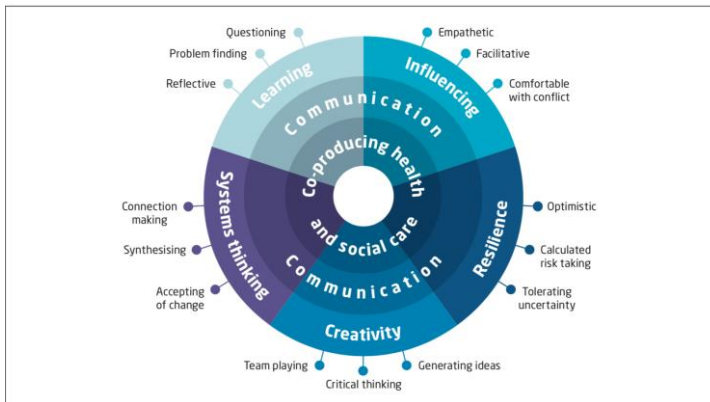
Figure 2: The habits of an improver (Lucas & Nacer, 2015)

A useful view of the purpose of this quality improvement culture in EYI communities is described in Figure 3, taken from the US National Institute of Standards and Technology *Baldridge Excellence Framework*, which characterises a 'mature' approach to quality improvement.

Steps toward Mature Processes

An Aid for Assessing and Scoring Process Items

Reacting to Problems (0–25%)

Strategic and Operational Goals

Operations are characterized by activities rather than by processes, and they are largely responsive to immediate needs or problems. Goals are poorly defined.

Early Systematic Approaches (30–45%)

Strategic and Operational Goals

The organization is beginning to carry out operations with repeatable processes, evaluation, and improvement, and there is some early coordination among organizational units. Strategy and quantitative goals are being defined.

Aligned Approaches (50–65%)

Strategic and Operational Goals

Operations are characterized by repeatable processes that are regularly evaluated for improvement. Learnings are shared, and there is coordination among organizational units. Processes address key strategies and goals.

Integrated Approaches (70–100%)

Strategic and Operational Goals

Operations are characterized by repeatable processes that are regularly evaluated for change and improvement in collaboration with other affected units. The organization seeks and achieves efficiencies across units through analysis, innovation, and the sharing of information and knowledge. Processes and measures track progress on key strategic and operational goals.

From Baldrige Performance Excellence Program. 2017. *2017–2018 Baldrige Excellence Framework: A Systems Approach to Improving Your Organization's Performance*. Gaithersburg, MD: U.S. Department of Commerce, National Institute of Standards and Technology. https://www.nist.gov/baldrige.

Figure 3: A mature systemic or highly integrated approach to early years quality improvement in EYI communities

3. Early Years Systems Quality: A Unifying Philosophy and Purpose

W. Edwards Deming is widely considered to have been a leading global influence on the broader international quality movement. Like Cottle (2013), he saw quality as a feature that needed to be approached from the perspective of workplace cultures, distilling his philosophy down to a relatively brief list of *essential points* (Deming & Orsini, 2013). In an abbreviated form, Deming's principles of quality improvement are a useful framework for implementing rapid cycle evaluations in EYI communities.

3.1 Quality Principles for the Early Years Systems

1. Constancy of purpose

Deming argued that it was not sufficient for organisations merely to do well, but that they needed to pursue constant improvement. In the context of the EYI, this is envisaged as a core theme across its 10-year life. The sites will trial local innovations, which will be supported with research and evaluation, and improvements will take place as communities together understand what does and does not work in their contexts, and why.

Also, consistent with Deming's thinking, cultures supportive of 'trying-testing-and learning' will be encouraged in EYI communities.

2. A positive philosophy

For the EYI, this closely aligns with the strengths-based idea that the situations communities and families find themselves in should not dictate their outcomes. In Australia, Dr. Chris Sarra of the *Stronger Smarter Institute* an example of describes a positive philosophy as one that:

> "*honours a positive sense of cultural identity, and acknowledges and embraces positive community leadership, enabling innovative and dynamic approaches and processes that are anchored by high-expectations relationships. High-expectations relationships honour the*

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humanity of others, and in so doing, acknowledge strengths, capacity and human rights to emancipating opportunities." (Stronger Smarter Institute, n.d.)

Focusing on what works and what the community wants to see more of will provide a *touchstone* for local quality improvement efforts. This may be a useful reference for rapid cycle evaluations, aiding judgments about whether services are meeting expectations and encouraging an aspiration through trying-testing and improving.

> *A dimension of a positive philosophy is that it should acknowledge and foster the capacity and commitment of people across settings and roles in their communities, as well as recognising their efforts in improving outcomes for families and children. As much as anything, a spirit of shared responsibility for children's outcomes will provide the common-purpose momentum needed for transformative systems change.*

3. Collaboration across the early years support system

Deming talked of the need to focus less on competitive forces and to invest more in collaborating. Deeply embedded in his view was that successful families, communities and societies are built on high levels of shared interest and collaborative effort.

Collaboration is essential to align the efforts of families, healthcare professionals, community groups, childcare services, religious and cultural organisations, neighbours and friendship networks, and so on. Directly, indirectly and collectively, all these efforts can support children's growth and development inside and outside their homes. This is the idea that is so well encapsulated in the saying that *'it takes a village to raise a child'*.

While many instinctively agree that supporting children's development takes collective effort, finding links and points of connection and collaboration in communities often proves challenging.

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In part, this may be because modern economies favour high levels of professionalisation and specialisation, which has correspondingly narrowed the roles people now perform in many jobs.

Narrowness of focus is a well understood challenge in government and other agencies, often referred to as *siloing of services*. While this is not only an issue for early years services, in this context, it can lead to situations in which the bigger picture of life for families, babies and small children can get lost amidst the priorities and perspectives of service providers and the systems to which they are accountable. This is a problem because, as Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested in his widely influential Ecological Systems Theory, it is only when the system itself is well harmonised that the best outcomes can occur for all.
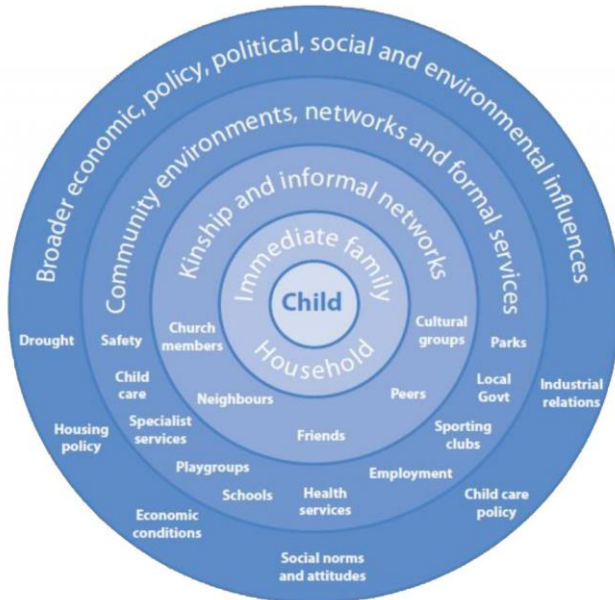
Figure 4: Influences on child wellbeing based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

The *Platforms* service redevelopment framework is an approach to supporting collaborative early years systems development that has been extensively tested in communities across Australia. Developed by the Melbourne Royal Children's Hospital's Centre for Community Child health, the Platforms framework is premised on the core ideas of:

- Services being engaged with and responding to the needs of their community;
- Services working together;
- Services planning and evaluating their work with their intended outcomes in mind; and
- Local leadership.

Platforms has been implemented in several rural and metropolitan communities and EYI communities might consider this as a way of supporting their early years system quality improvement endeavours.

4. Investing in skilling people and encouraging openness

Deming gave significant emphasis to aspects of *on-the-job* skills development, development of leadership capacity and in establishing cultures in which barriers to collaboration and perceived hierarchies were eliminated. Essentially, he was making the point that:

systems do better when its members are encouraged and supported to be honest about areas in which they are feeling out of their depth or need development, where leadership is oriented to supporting them to do a better job, and where levels of trust are high.

Such cultures and leadership styles have been extensively described in the literature in recent decades as being associated with *high performing* organisations and are the dominant approach in organisational theory. They are especially relevant to environments like those oriented to supporting families.

Notably too, many of Deming's ideas about positive organisational cultures and behaviour are a mirror of things found to characterise the home environments that optimise child development. Given this, it seems reasonable to expect all EYI community service systems aim to reflect the characteristics they seek to foster and promote among local families.

5. Acknowledging and fostering the desire to contribute

Deming encouraged a view of people as being internally motivated to do a good job and that the role of leadership was to remove barriers to this occurring. In general, his perspective aligns with public sector reform ideas of Armstrong (1997) who emphasised an involvement oriented philosophy. Armstrong's described this as one with:

> "*shared goals, a long-term, future orientation, commitment, training, acceptance of risks and errors, innovation and personal expertise and respect… a leadership style which builds relationships, not structures… helping employees meet their full potential…Learning from mistakes and intimately involving employees in problem solving and improvement processes …Management and staff share and are committed to the organizations values and goals.*"

Much of Armstrong's involvement philosophy accords with the general intent of the EYI as well as current human services reforms underway in Western Australia and nationally. This includes rapid cycle evaluation, which is premised on the idea that communities should set broad goals and then learn and adjust based on experience from action.

4. Data-to-Action: Rapid Cycle Early Years Intervention Evaluation

4.1 Background

Zacocs et al's. (2015) *Data-to-Action* framework offers a guide to undertake rapid cycle evaluation to help improve programs in the field. The framework was developed during the implementation of a community initiative that, like the EYI, attempted to address a broad social policy issue across multiple sites using locally designed approaches underpinned by evidence. The *Data-to-Action* framework described by Zakocs et al. (2015) forms the basis for some of what follows.

Data-to-Action helps participants *learn while doing*, encouraging program improvements as more experience is gained about what is working well and for whom, and what isn't and needs to be changed (Armstead et al., 2018).

The Framework helps to provide rapid feedback for development, refinement, improvement, and to identify program implementation problems or issues. It is premised on '*real world*' experience that even the best ideas need to be refined to work effectively in the field – a logic that underpins multi-disciplinary teams of the type that EYI is employing to solve complex problems.

The expectation is that the process will identify the need for adjustments and inform how these might be progressed.

Zakocs et al. (2015) point to relevant areas for rapid cycle evaluation as:

- understanding the strengths of a program or service and opportunities for enhancement;
- assessing how participants view a program(s) or service;
- plotting progress in achieving outcomes;
- identifying issues with implementation; and
- determining the impact that different environments or circumstances might be having on services/programs.

The general steps in *Data-to-Action* include (Armstead et al., 2018):

4.2 A Stepwise Guide to Data-to-Action for Early Years System Improvement Teams

The following sections provide a step by step guide. It is based on the data-to-action framework, but with modifications to suit the Western Australian context. The steps are intended as suggestions rather than a prescription for action. Consequently, EYI communities should make any changes to the steps they think appropriate in their setting.

Step 1: Establish an Early Years System Improvement Team and Agree Broad Topics

Membership

In each EYI community, it is suggested that a local *Early Years System Improvement Team* (EYSIT) be formed. This should be empowered by the local *EYI Community Board* to address gaps in knowledge and suggest refinements to areas of practice in new and existing programs and services. The work of the EYSIT might focus on entire local populations of families with 0-4-year olds or sub-groups.

> *An enduring emphasis for all rapid cycle evaluations should be to work out how well things are working for families and their 0-4-year-old children in the respective communities. A corresponding goal should be to ensure maximum accessibility and effectiveness of service and program delivery and to listen and respond to parent feedback about what is and is not working well.*

Areas to look at initially could be systems for parent and child *recruitment* and *retention*, and how seamless and timely *referral pathways* between organisations and professions are (with a particular focus on parents' perspectives).

Each community EYSIT is envisaged as a partnership between community members, staff, managers and evaluators to conduct, interpret and use rapid-cycle-evaluation data for system improvement. To formalise this, it is suggested that local EYI communities establish their own EYSIT with membership from a cross-section of these diverse stakeholder groups. The relationship between EYSIT's and other stakeholders is summarised in Figure 6.
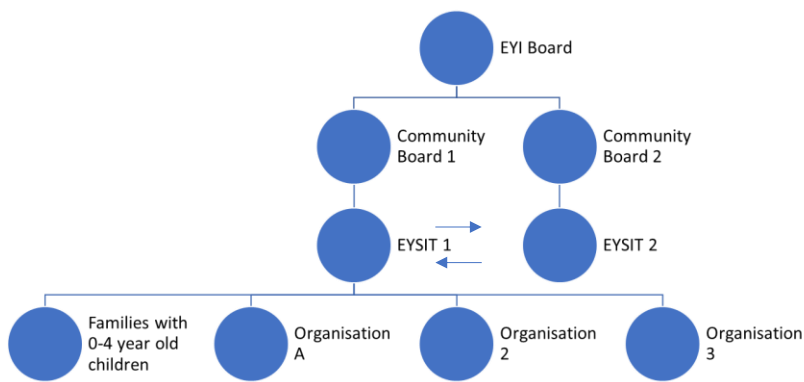
Figure 5: Relationships between an EYSIT and other stakeholders

Each EYSIT will be responsible for identifying its own priority topics. It will also plan these, obtain relevant data, implement a range of safe to fail experiments, interpret these, and provide feedback on what has worked for whom and why to the EYI Community Boards and more broadly to inform learning.

As a general guide, it is suggested that local EYSIT membership should include a mix of community representatives reflecting its demographic diversity, experienced *coalface* service providers from a range of agencies/sectors, local organisational and community leaders, and an evaluator. It is suggested that each EYSIT be chaired by a community member (e.g. a parent of a 0-4-year-old child). The relationship between EYSIT's and other stakeholders is summarised in Figure 5.

It might be that as an EYSIT progresses with its work, its membership needs will change, so this should be discussed and accommodated from the outset. Transitions in and out of the group should

be encouraged, including the possibility that some people might join, leave and then re-join at a later stage of work when it is considered more 'relevant' to their knowledge and skills.

In such groups, diversity of perspectives and skills can be a strength. Among the perspectives and skills that might be valuable to an EYSIT are:

- Local cultural knowledge;
- Awareness of local social networks and systems;
- Local faith-based perspectives and issues;
- Local community service and recreation groups and clubs;
- Contemporary experience in the community as a parent/carer of a 0-4-year-old child(ren);
- Healthy pregnancy and early child development;
- The role of play in child development;
- Early literacy development;
- Developmental health risks and conditions;
- Community and region-specific expertise;
- Housing provision spanning different tenure and household types (e.g. private rental, community housing, transitional housing, affordable housing);
- Maternal and child nutrition;
- 'School readiness' and what this entails;
- Safe and effective parenting practices;
- Safe home environments and domestic violence;
- Alcohol and other drug issues;
- Community facilities and spaces, including issues related to mobility and inclusion for people with disabilities;
- Local early years community services and programs;
- Community safety and security;

- Principles of effective family engagement;
- Training and employment systems and pathways; and
- Community leadership and decision-making systems and processes.

Of course, it is likely that such an extensive blend of knowledge and skills will be able to be captured within a more *modest membership* than the list suggests. The ability to draw on such diverse perspectives will, however, ensure the EYSIT has the capacity for a deep understanding of local families and the local early year's system.

Early Reflections

A point of early reflection for local EYSIT's should be that while aspects of early development might be relatively well understood, the practicalities of effectively supporting local families to optimise child development in their community will be an area where much remains to be learnt and where *local knowledge and experience* will be critical to improve outcomes.

A second point is that an EYSIT should not see its work as a quick fix or necessarily always 'large-scale'. Many small scale initiatives that address locally identified problems or issues and which emphasise a try, test and learn approach are more likely to bring lasting improvements than a single large endeavour.

A third point is that the processes followed in both planning and evaluating improvements should be '*good enough*' to meet local needs. As the saying goes, it is important to avoid making the '*perfect the enemy of the good'*. In other words, adding complexity to planning and design stages can sometimes be a hindrance to action and may ultimately not add much value to the process.

Some potential ideas to put through the rapid cycle process include:

- Whether local families are adequately informed about early years services and whether they find them accessible (i.e. *a marketing issue*);
- Whether early years service providers are well informed about the work of others in the local area and whether collaborative planning and service delivery occurs (i.e. *information sharing*);

- Whether local children's developmental problems are identified early enough, with timely referrals to specialist services and appropriate follow up (i.e. *capacity constraints and services access*);
- Whether parenting and family functioning problems are recognised and responded to early (*i.e. capacity constraints and access*);
- Whether families receive help from local services that cohesively address their needs (i.e. *system coherence*);
- Whether there are local families who are socially isolated or who are not making use of child and family support services (i.e. *accessibility*) (Centre for Community Child Health, 2009).

Obviously, these are only intended as prompts to help EYSIT's think about their local early years system. Another point that may help EYSIT's to frame their thinking about the scope of their system is that it might be viewed in terms of the following service domains:

1. 'Preventive' health services (e.g. immunisation and child health checks);

2. 'Treatment' services (e.g. doctors, therapists, hospitals, vision and hearing);

3. General family 'resource support' services (toy library, neighbourhood centre, and council support service);

4. 'At risk' services (intensive home visiting, family support, housing support); and

5. 'Community Building' services (play group, library, sport/recreation group, and mothers group).

Each of these domains plays distinct roles when it comes to scaffolding children's development and supporting parents, so thinking about this might help EYSIT members as they reflect on their own early years system and in considering areas for attention.

Appointing an Evaluator

It is suggested that a local part-time *rapid cycle evaluator* be appointed to work with each EYSIT to support the Team (e.g. *meeting times and places, planning, proposing data gathering methods and measures, writing up reports, communicating results and recommendation*s, etc.).

> *It is expected that this role will generally be best undertaken by a person with some experience in quality improvement within each of the selected communities (e.g. a Quality Coordinator within a childcare service, a healthcare professional with a background in quality improvement etc.).*

Where this is not possible, the local evaluator might be a community member or local frontline service provider with an interest in developing rapid cycle evaluation skills. These evaluators will be supported by CoLab staff as required, who will also assist with monitoring the collective work of EYSIT's and will share information and findings between communities as well as reporting these to the EYI Board. CoLab will also arrange for *rapid cycle evaluators* from EYI communities to meet occasionally to allow them to *compare notes* on the development, methods, and findings from their work in their respective EYI communities.

For Zakocs et al. (2015), a primary role of evaluators in local teams is to help to frame questions that the team wants answered, noting that how the questions are framed will shape the answers (Grieten et al., 2018). Evaluators' other key roles include clarifying types and sources of data that will answer their questions, helping to facilitate open and frank discussion and debate and providing a '*reality check*' on how programs are actually being implemented versus individual expectations or beliefs. It is important, however, that the evaluator be a '*rower*' not a '*steerer*' in determining what issues are to be evaluated. In other words, they should respond to priorities set by the collective membership of the EYSIT, not set their own agenda.

As noted, an important role for evaluators will be to record and communicate decisions taken by local EYSIT teams to ensure the path of local EYI development is clearly documented so that it can inform future scaling of findings to other communities. This is critical because the EYI was always envisaged as something that could inform practice across all communities, acting as an 'incubator for innovation'.

Agreeing Broad Topics

Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2017) cite World Bank and Global Fund research demonstrating that improvement projects are more likely to succeed if they pursue locally defined, specific challenges in an iterative way. As part of this, they refer to using baseline data gathered in the early stages to determine potential safe to file experiments followed by frequent evaluation and adjustment. Thus, they need to be adaptive, allowing continuous changes in the design to ensure problems are effectively addressed.

Consequently, it is anticipated that *topics, problems or issues* could be suggested by anyone within a local community's early year's system. Other topics will directly result from formal EYI planning and priority setting processes led by the Community Board itself. Either way, these should be endorsed by the EYI Community Board prior to starting.

Once endorsed, the EYSIT will complete a simple *project brief* using a template provided by CoLab. A copy should then be sent to CoLab. By compiling these and project reports on how the experiments went, CoLab will be able to feed the learnings into the EYI evaluation process and provide the EYI Board with a summary of what is happening at community level

As a guide to thinking about topic areas for rapid cycle evaluations, Foster-Fishman, Nowell, and Yang (2007) point to four key dimensions of systems:

a) prevailing systems attitudes, values and beliefs (i.e. system norms);

b) the human, social and economic resources available within the system (i.e. system capacity);

c) the policies and procedures through which the system is regulated (i.e. system rules); and

d) decision-making structures and processes (system power).

For Foster-Fishman et al. (2007) these are four the things that will dictate what happens in any system. They refer to them as the "*parts that maintain and constrain*" (p. 204) pointing to the critical importance of *aligning these pieces* with desired end states. Likewise, Andrews et al. (2017) refer to these things needing to cohere if systems are to '*work best'*.

Because system norms, capacity, rules, and power are the key levers for making systems change, local early years rapid cycle evaluation topics should be considered in the context of these dimensions.

Table 1 draws on Andrews et al. (2107) and is a tool to help EYSIT's reflect on possible local service problems, issues or challenges and their causes. Table 1 asks an EYSIT to first briefly describe the nature of a local challenge they have identified and then to try to '*unpack'* each of the different systems dimensions that seem to be contributing as underpinning causes.

Step 2: Developing Testable Quality Improvement Ideas

Ultimately, the focus of EYSIT rapid cycle evaluations should be on reviewing how part(s) of a local early years system is/are currently functioning and how it/they should function in the future. McCay, Derr, and Person (2017) refer to it being helpful to anchor these questions in a "*roadmap*".

> A roadmap is an ideal world view of how you expect a selected area of the local early years system to be working.

This is akin to the 'dreaming' step within AI. A way to commence developing a road-map is to start by brainstorming the objectives involved in the topic area or issue that the EYSIT wants to address. This process can be helped by inviting local parents to describe their views of "ideal scenarios" or experiences of using a service, program or of an aspect related to this (e.g. a referral process). This can be complemented with the experiences of frontline staff, managers and others with direct

experience of the topic area or issue. McCay et al. (2017) refer to common methods for gathering feedback including questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, observations and focus groups. Other methods including reviewing administrative (i.e. activity data) and other service record information (e.g. test results, client profiles etc.). However, doing this exploratory step collaboratively, rather than through individual interviews or focus groups will generate a much richer understanding (Cooperrider, 1986; Cooperrider, Zandee, Godwin, Avital, Boland, 2013; Grieten, Lambrechts, Bouwen et al, 2018; Scharmer, 2018). McCay et al. do emphasise that all data accessed should be selected to respond to questions the EYSIT wants answered.

Thus, whatever methods are used, the data should be sufficient or '*good enough*' to provide an EYSIT with the information needed to begin prototyping. These steps should make explicit the general logic in a part of the local early years system in the form of '*we do **a** so that **b** is possible, **b** so that **c** is possible*' and so on.

The objective is to explore what a system that *works well* for parents would look like (e.g. '*what should local parents see/experience/feel*'). Along with thinking about the things needed to succeed, an EYSIT should also think about possible short- and long-term signs of success and what these might *look like* (e.g. *how will we know if our work is making a difference*?, *what will we see*?). Again, parents and other stakeholders can provide insight on this. The aim is not to get to one solution but rather to test lots of possibilities, find what works for which families, what doesn't work and to continually improve. It is a journey of discovery. A template is provided in Table 2.

To develop a roadmap, some sub-questions may be a useful place to start conversations. The following are possible examples of these sub-questions:

1. What were relationships like between practitioners and parents when our program/service was most effective? How could we create more relationships like these?
2. When did parents from different socio-cultural engage in our program/service/community? What can we learn from this?

3. Where do parents want services/programs located? How can we make this happen?
4. What information do parents want about our programs/services and how do they want this provided? What would work for them and how can we meet their needs?
5. What sort of image do we hope different groups of parents have of our organisations, services or staff? What would it take for parents to view us like this?
6. What sorts of skills/attributes/attitudes and behaviours do parents want our staff to have? How can we grow in these directions?
7. What is needed for parents to feel secure and trust us? How can we work together to build this?
8. What should we do to ensure our program or service is offered on days and at times and in ways parents want?
9. What would a referral system that works for families look like? How can we co-design this and implement it?
10. What organisational policies should we adopt or drop to enable collaboration?
11. What immediate and short-term things should we expect to see if our program or service is/is not working well? What mechanisms can we put in place to get honest feedback from parents and children?
12. What medium and long-term things should we expect to see if our program or service is/is not working well? What mechanisms can we put in place to get honest feedback from parents and children?

Once an EYSIT has identified and considered questions they think are relevant to the topic area they are considering, their answers can then be arranged so that they *tell the story* of their analysis of the causes of current challenges, juxtaposed with an image of proposed improvements in the form of strategies or actions. These can then be complemented with short-, medium- and long-term expected changes and outcomes. While spelling out the connections between particular strategies and the changes expected requires a little effort, McCay et al. (2017) do see 'roadmaps' as fairly basic tables that should list: (a) strategies or actions; (b) short and medium-term changes; and (c) longer term outcomes. It is important to note, however, that the *rapid cycle* aspect is not lost.

> Clarifying a roadmap or causes and multiple potential solutions for addressing local issues will provide a shared understanding of how an EYSIT believes changes or 'experiments' in their early year's system will deliver better outcomes for local parents and their children's development.

This shared view or '*story*' of an area of work that is being done in their early year's system will be a key point of reference for rapid cycle evaluation. It will provide signposts for an EYSIT to progress ideas about how aspects of their early year's system might function better and indicate the sorts of questions that might continue to be asked to check on whether improvements made are working.

As noted, it may take a little time and care to spell out the elements of a roadmap. Experience suggests that getting this into a form that is agreed by all members may require a lot of discussion and debate. This stage should not be avoided or abbreviated because it is only through this process that divergence will be identified, and shared understandings can be achieved. The discussion alone can be useful in resolving issues because it might highlight misunderstandings which are sometimes in themselves critical to improvement.

Once shared understanding is achieved, a final roadmap can then be drafted to reflect how the local EYSIT has interpreted a local challenge and how it believes an aspect of its local early years system might better work more positively to support local parents and/or their children's development. Thus, roadmaps encapsulate both '*current- and future-state*' analyses. In this way, they are a first step in a strategic approach to early years service system quality improvement.

Once final roadmaps are agreed, the next suggested stage of rapid cycle evaluation is to develop:

1. A broad *outcomes hierarchy* showing how the EYSIT expect their selected area of their early years system will operate; and
2. A planning table listing expectations of change, resource requirements, sources of measures to be used to monitor changes; and how these measures will be obtained.

An outcomes hierarchy is a very basic expression of the logical steps in how proposed changes to a program or service/practice will lead to benefits for local families or children. A worked example of an *outcomes hierarchy* is provided in Figure 6.
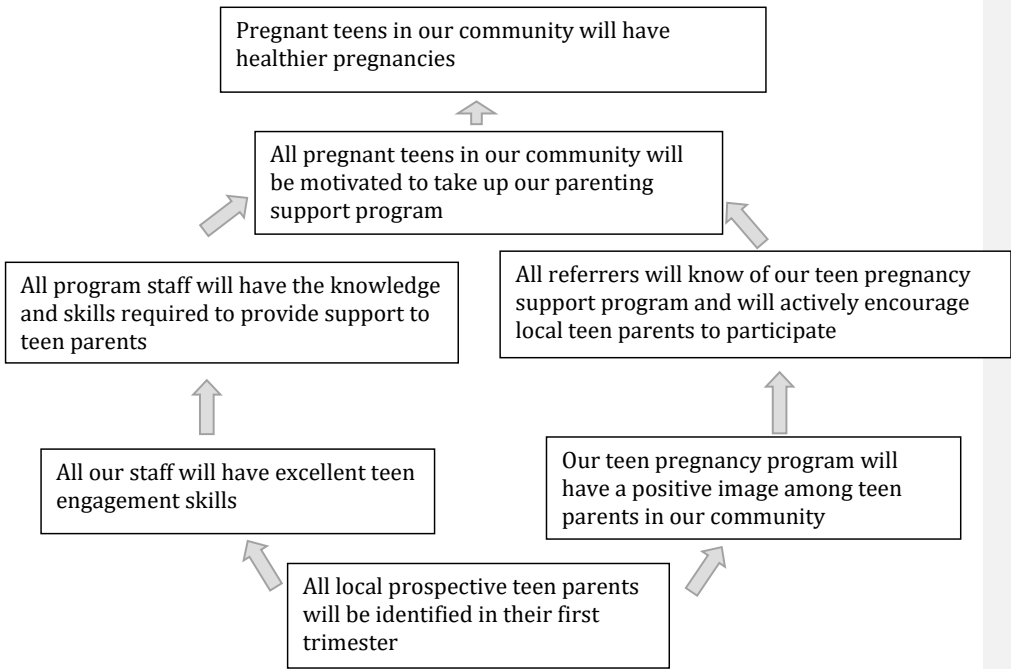

Figure 6: An example of an outcomes hierarchy

This provides a framework for prototyping multiple experiments to achieve these outcomes and makes the intentions behind these explicit.

Step 3: Iteratively Evaluate Implementation

Implementing plans of the type described in Table 3 through prototyping is suggested as a sequence of stepwise learning cycles; an opportunity for learning by *trial and error* or what McCay et al. (2017) terms *road tests*. Andrews et al. (2017) advocates that to develop an action-oriented culture and get momentum the first cycle should be highly specified, with detailed lists of the steps to be taken by who and when. As people gain an understanding of how the process operates, it can become much less prescriptive.

A stepwise approach also prevents the need for the EYSIT to get bogged down with too many details at the outset, allowing it to begin implementing changes, testing different options and learning lessons about what is and is not working and where (Andrews et al., 2017).

Each step in an implementation process is expected to be short, spanning only weeks or perhaps a few months. Information should be collected along the way so staff and others can get a good understanding of how well a new or changed program or service is being implemented and opportunities for further improvements. The iterations should stop once the service and the families they serve are happy with the approach(es).

Zakocs et al.'s (2015) advice with this is to collect data that is "good enough" to aid reflection and decision making. For McCay et al. (2017) good enough data means that at each step, feedback is obtained from managers, staff and clients. The goal here is to identify what is working well, challenges as well as opportunities and concrete ideas for improvement. They suggest that an EYSIT might consider the following questions reflecting on the data from each step:

- What seems to have worked well and not so well (*what was learnt*)?
- Does the feedback suggest that our strategy is having the intended effects?
- How can we build on our successes?

- Can we remedy the things that haven't worked or should we try something different (*what now*)?

Zakocs et al. (2015) suggests that for each cycle, a brief report on findings is produced. This should be a basic document intended to help the EYSIT undertake a reflective discussion session on the findings, and then make decisions about any implications for their improvement project. These reports and a log of decisions should be forwarded to CoLab to aid evaluation of the overall EYI and to inform the EYI Board and other communities of progress and learnings.

5. Summary

This evidence paper has been written for communities involved in the EYI and has described an approach to rapid cycle evaluation. It provides an overview of ideas and tools that could help inform local early years system quality improvement and which draw on methods outlined in evaluation and other literature. This evidence paper informs the EYSIT Guide.

A notion that lies at the heart of this evidence paper is one that has been forcefully argued by Andrews et al. (2017). This is that the most important capacity in human service domains like early years systems is the capability for implementing comprehensive local solutions to complex policy challenges. They argue that it is this capability itself that is a defining characteristic of all high performing systems. Andrews et al. (2017) also argue that the tools and guidance to help with this issue have been given too little emphasis.

It is our hope that the implementation of rapid cycle evaluation at community level will:

Improve the health, learning and development of children from conception to age four by designing, testing and evaluating place-based initiatives in low socio-economic communities.

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