Background

About this Report

In this Chapter, we present some background information about this meta-evaluation study, and this report and its development. Later chapters give additional information about the formation and development of the Priority Action Schools Program.

In normal usage in the evaluation literature, a “meta-evaluation” is an evaluation of an evaluation study. This meta-evaluation includes that function, but it is a meta-evaluation in a different sense: it is an overarching evaluation of the NSW Priority Schools Action Program, encompassing the processes by which the Program as a whole was managed as well as the evaluation work undertaken by the seventy-four schools participating in the Program (“PASP schools”).

The formation and development of the Program is outlined in Chapter 3. In this chapter, we focus on the commissioning and character of the meta-evaluation study.

The evaluators

In October 2002, the Superintendent overseeing the Program approached Susan Groundwater-Smith to invite her to undertake the meta-evaluation study. In the conversations that ensued, it was decided also to invite Stephen Kemmis, recently appointed to Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga to participate in the meta-evaluation team.

Susan Groundwater-Smith is the principal of her own educational consultancy operation and Honorary Fellow at the University of Sydney. After working for a number of years as a teacher, she was appointed to the Department of Education (now the Faculty of Education and Social Work) at the University of Sydney. She later held a chair at the University of Technology Sydney. After her retirement, she has been adjunct professor at several universities (including the University of Western Sydney and Griffith University), her honorary appointment at Sydney, and many appointments as a visiting fellow and researcher. She works with the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools in Sydney (a group of schools conducting research into their own practices). She is the author of many articles,
Stephen Kemmis is Professor of Education at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga. He worked at the University of Sydney before completing a doctorate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, then worked in the UK at the University of East Anglia. On his return to Australia, he worked at Deakin University, where he held a personal chair. He left Deakin to work as an independent consultant and researcher, then accepted appointments at the University of Ballarat where he was pro vice Chancellor (Research) then Deputy vice Chancellor (Operations). After completing those contracts, he again worked as an independent consultant, then returned to an academic appointment at Charles Sturt University. He has written extensively on educational research and evaluation, including case study methods and participatory action research, and is the author of many evaluation reports.

This report and its development

Commissioning of this meta-evaluation study

In November, 2002, the meta-evaluators were contracted to the NSW Department of Education and Training to undertake this meta-evaluation study. The brief for the study included a variety of elements including:

- working with the state PASP team (the senior officers managing the Program) to advise on evaluation (including schools’ self-evaluation activities) and action inquiry methods and how they might be deployed in the program, and on a variety of ways in which the Program could function as a “knowledge building program”;

- working with academic partners for PASP schools towards the development of school learning portfolios documenting their work, and portfolio reports that would summarise the work and achievements of the schools during 2003;

- conducting case studies of various aspects of the work of the Program, including case studies investigating “student voice” (how students saw the work of PASP in a school), pedagogical changes being made in schools, and the work of academic partners;

- helping to design the process for, and participating in a number of, school visits to be undertaken by members of the state PASP team in June 2003 to gather information on how the Program was working at the school level and to provide feedback to the schools on their progress;

- leading key sessions in a PASP Forum for academic partners held in February 2003 and another for participating schools in March 2003, and participating in the November 2003 Forum at which all PASP schools reported on their progress and achievements at the end of 2003;
• maintaining continuing contact with the state PASP team to collect information about the Program and its processes and progress throughout 2003, acting as critical friends to the Program in a way that roughly paralleled the work being done by academic partners at the individual school level; and

• analysing and interpreting the archive of evidence collected through 2003, including the reports from the other processes mentioned above as well as the portfolio reports submitted to PASP by schools after the November PASP Forum, and preparing this final report on the Program.

Procedure
There are many approaches to the evaluation of educational programs. Many are based on the *aims-achievement approach* – attempting to determine the extent to which programs meet their intended objectives. Indeed, this understanding of evaluation is so ubiquitous as to be thought by many outside the field of evaluation to be the only approach to program evaluation. To some extent, this meta-evaluation study adopts this orientation to evaluation, but it also sought to describe the nature, processes, outcomes and consequences of the Program beyond the narrow range of its intended aims and anticipated outcomes. In particular, however, this evaluation study eschewed the view of program evaluation that takes goals, aims or objectives of a program as the basis for identifying the primary and perhaps sole key indicators of program success. Knowing that a Program achieves its aims is proper and good, but too great an emphasis on aims can lead to a narrowness of vision that obscures what a program does, how it does it, and what it achieves in relation to a variety of stakeholder perspectives, different values and different viewpoints. Moreover, where the aims-achievement approach focuses only on what outcomes can be precisely measured against defined *key performance indicators*, it risks narrowing the vision of the evaluator and evaluation audiences even further – restricting learning to what was intended, and, as a subset of that, to what aspects of those intentions can be measured on particular indicators and instruments. This meta-evaluation adopted a very different view. While recognising that the Program’s and schools’ objectives are important, as is knowing whether they are making progress towards achieving their objectives, and recognising that some performance indicator data can be relevant in measuring progress, the meta-evaluators are of the view that participants and stakeholders in a program are themselves instruments – they are capable of giving reasoned accounts of the nature, processes, achievements and consequences of the work of the program from their own perspectives, from their own value-positions, from their own experience of the program. By triangulating evidence across these data sources, the meta-evaluators could get a rounded picture of what it was and did, grounded in the variously expert and variously well-informed views of a diverse range of people associated with it – from students to school staff members to community members to program managers and policy makers.

Occasionally, evaluations are conducted according to a “goal-free” approach, according to which the evaluator attempts to describe the outcomes of a program without knowing (and therefore regardless of) the goals, aims and objectives the program
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intends to pursue. This meta-evaluation study is not a “goal-free” evaluation, but it shares with that approach an intention to describe processes and outcomes beyond those particular outcomes that happen to be expressed in the aims of the Program.

Many evaluations, especially within the broad church of the qualitative approach to evaluation, aim to “illuminate” programs – to tell their story, as it were. Some within this tradition are also “responsive” – aiming to respond to the interconnectedness of circumstance, action and consequence in a program, its intentions, its values, and the perspectives and concerns of those who inhabit and observe it. The meta-evaluators intended this study to be a responsive evaluation, and did aim to illuminate the Program and its achievements through case studies and other reports on the work of the Program – including this one.

Many program evaluations aim to be independent – as did the meta-evaluators conducting this study. Some evaluators take this independence to mean that they should evaluate a program entirely against criteria drawn from fields of research literature relevant to the work of a program, or to mean that they – or some others, like program managers or sponsors – should define the yardsticks by which the work of a program is to be measured. In short, they confuse what they think of as scientific “objectivity” and the idea of “independence”. In our view, independence means acting with the detachment that allows the evaluator to reach conclusions on the basis of the evidence before them – as a judge must do in a courtroom, guided by law and facts, not solely by the advice of expert witnesses. This is to say that independence is a procedural value, not a position (in our view unattainable) of value neutrality attained by treating the people in a program as subjects (or objects) to be studied according to narrow empiricist views of “scientific method”.

Moreover, the meta-evaluators conducting this study also believed that it was proper to behave as “critical friends” and “academic partners” to those working in the Program, and that, in doing so, we would not yield our critical independence. We regarded ourselves as participants of a certain, specialist kind, but as participants in the shaping and conduct of the Program nonetheless. We did so, without giving up our view that we could and should be entirely independent in our judgements – that we should respond on the basis of the evidence before us, interpreted in the light of our experience. We sought evidence that confirmed and disconfirmed participants’ views, explored contradictions between perspectives and judgements, explored and expressed critical views forthrightly, and weighed the reasons for and against different conclusions, and in the end reached our own evaluation of the Program without particular concern about the consequences for us of adopting this view or that. In short, we attempted to act in accordance with a view of rationality as reasonableness, and to take and weigh people’s reasons seriously as evidence to be considered in reaching our own evaluation. This is to adopt the view that, in program evaluation, rigour is in reason; it is not a matter of “method” whether dignified as one among the range of approaches that describe themselves as “scientific method”, or a matter of methodological purity in following the procedures prescribed by this or that evaluation technology. On this view, rigour consists in finding reasons (one’s own and others’), testing their adequacy, and weighing the evidence to arrive at reasoned conclusions. As in renaissance humanism, this is not to presume that the testing and weighing of reasons in
evaluation can be codified or reduced to a mechanical or technical procedure, but rather that evaluation is always itself an exercise in critical reasoning – frequently reasoning about others’ reasons and reasoning. This evaluation report can thus be read as an account of our critical reasoning about the Priority Action Schools Program as observed by us and as it was described and reported to us by many different kinds of observers of its work at different sites and different times.

Finally, as already indicated, the meta-evaluators acted as critical friends to the Program in the sense that we gave advice – suggestions – to the state PASP team and others associated with the Program about various aspects of the work of the Program at various times, not in the expectation that our advice would be taken, but in the expectation that it would be considered alongside other views. It was apparent from the beginning of our work with the Program that our role would require us, in the end, to ‘stand back’ and make our own evaluation. We were therefore unwilling to “stand back” as uninvolved bystanders while the Program progressed. It is not our view that thinking constructively about how the Program should proceed is the sole responsibility of those whose work constituted it, and that we should therefore refrain from giving advice. On the contrary, we take the view that giving what one hopes is helpful advice is a responsibility of people who have the privilege of being in the confidence of key Program participants as they worked and reflected on their work. We could not share their formal responsibilities for their work, but at times we had the opportunity to offer advice in a spirit of collaboration in the development of the Program. The alternative view of independence as cold detachment from the work of a program, as avoiding involvement in the practical deliberation that shapes it, seems to us flawed – indeed, to deny the moral and professional responsibility of working as constructively and as reasonably as one can alongside others whose work will make or break the program.

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It has been a privilege to work on this meta-evaluation study. We cannot hope to name all the students, teachers, principals, community members, academic partners and others who shared their thinking with us, and whose writing gave us windows into the experience of the Program as it was experienced in PASP schools. We can however, express our gratitude to the state PASP team for their extraordinary openness with us, and their willingness to enact the conviction that the Priority Action Schools Program would be, to a greater extent, a knowledge building program if they thought aloud with us, shared their concerns, and invited our responses and comments about what they were doing. This meta-evaluation should be read as a shared exercise in knowledge building, entered into knowingly by people who wanted to expose their ideas to constructive critical reasoning and evaluation. In particular, we wish to acknowledge and thank Diane Wasson, Sue Beveridge, Rani Lewis-Jones, David Ferguson, Gary Zadkovich, Marie Murphy and Mark Diamond for their assistance in making their work and their thinking accessible to us, and to Rhonda Jackson whose organisational and administrative skill facilitated our work on this study.
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