Lessons from an Evaluation Experience: The School Wide Improvement Model (SWIM)

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Abstract

The role of evaluation is beginning to be recognized in South African research. Researchers believe that programs and projects can be improved only if proper evaluation is conducted. This paper looks at a model developed after reading Carol Weiss' Theory of Change. Not only did the researchers use Weiss, they also employed the work of other evaluation experts such as Patton, McDonald and Babbie. They utilized these theories when they were evaluating the Secondary School Intervention Program (SSIP) in South Africa. The researchers discussed their findings in an earlier study (2013). This specific work though explicates a developed model suggested for the improvement of the SSIP. The researchers demonstrate the complexity of evaluation and illustrate a model that has a potential influence on policy and practice, both of which are aspects emphasized by Weiss whose work is cited lavishly here. Through this (SWIM) model various aspects are explicated to show how one can overcome some of the potential challenges in program improvement.

Keywords: Complexity, Policy Improvement, Theory of Change, Politics, Intervention Program

1. Introduction: Weiss and the Theory of Change

Hanberger (2012) cites several authors including Weiss who state that monitoring and evaluation are crucial in today's society; moreover, these authors support democratic governance, accountability as well as program improvement. Weiss (1972a:4) defines the purpose of evaluation as a process "to measure the effects of a program against the goals it set out to accomplish as a means of contributing to subsequent decision making about the program and improving future programming". Her interest in evaluation was always to examine the goals that the program itself promulgated. Evaluation needs to influence decision making as it ensures that the evaluation will be able to improve future programs. Weiss' theory (1972b) has also been influenced by the political situation as all programs tend to be influenced by a certain political atmosphere. This then means that the political context affects the work of evaluators; evaluators are pressured by political influences. In fact, Weiss and Alkin (2004: 29) contend that there are three principal ways in which politics encroach on program education:

(i) Programs are created and maintained by political forces:
(ii) Higher echelons of government, which make decisions about programs are embedded in politics; and
(iii) The very act of evaluation has political connotations.

Weiss is aware of the challenges that the evaluation process constantly encounters. Sometimes it might not be easy for an evaluator to have appropriate tools and techniques to understand fully what is going on (Weiss, 1998). Furthermore, Weiss (1998:5) argues:

> *Theory-based evaluation is one approach that has a great deal of promise. But trying to use theory-based evaluation is difficult when programs do not have any explicit- or even implicit-theories, when programs are amorphous, or when they shift significantly over time… Evaluators cannot rely solely on their expertise in research methodology any longer. They have to understand the program field.*

The above shows the need to plan for evaluation thoroughly. Weiss stresses the need for evaluators to understand a program and how it works well. This author speaks of what she calls *evaluation appreciation*. She argues that for practitioners to conduct effective evaluation they need to understand what evaluation is all about as well as what it takes to conduct a good study. Furthermore, evaluators need to know what to do with evaluation results. Hanberger (2012)

highlights that there is interplay between evaluation and governance and that all evaluation systems are crucial in democratic governance.

Effective evaluations lead to the improvement of programs and good delivery of projects in future. Of crucial importance is that evaluation should have an influence on policy and practice Weiss *et al.* (2005). The latter promulgation has influenced a number of evaluation experts. However, Weiss *et al.* argue that there is general consensus and that evaluation is mainly used in three ways; firstly, it is used to give direction to policy and practice; secondly, it is used to justify pre-existing preferences and actions and finally, to provide new generalisations, ideas and concepts. All those involved in social policy making need effective evaluation strategies based on sound theory. Programs are usually very complex and frequently need effective program theory for evaluation. However, there are considerable challenges to program theory and not all evaluators are convinced it is useful (Rogers, 2008). Furthermore, Rogers argues that sometimes referred to as program logic or theory of change it points to a variety of ways of developing a causal modal linking program inputs to a chain of observed outcomes and then using this model to guide evaluation.

This paper will first briefly look at Weiss's Theory of Change before shifting the focus on the SSIP. The SSIP is crucial because the School Wide Improvement Model (SWIM) of evaluation tabled later was developed after the researchers conducted a study on the SSIP and discovered a number of flaws that include the lack of evaluation map (Setlhako & Msila, 2013). Finally, the paper concludes by elucidating the SWIM.

2. The Theory of Change

As seen in the discussions above, Weiss is linked to this concept which she has used widely in her work as an evaluator (Weiss, 1995). She argues that many programs are so difficult to evaluate because they are based on poorly articulated assumptions. Weiss emphasizes the need to look at the mini-steps if a long term outcome is to be attained. She also stresses policy makers to be specific about the theories of change that guide their work arguing that this clarity would help improve policies and enhance their ability to claim credit for outcomes that were predicted in their theory (Weiss, 1995).

Leeuw (1996) lists steps that elicit the theory of change underlying a planned program. These enforce the evaluator to work with a wide range of stakeholders. These are the steps:

Step 1: The focus is on long term vision of a program and likely to relate to a time scale that lies beyond its timeframe.

Step 2: Having agreed the ultimate aim of the program stakeholders is encouraged to consider the necessary outcomes that will be necessary by the end of the program.

Step 3 & Step 4: Stakeholders are asked to articulate the types of outputs and short-term outcomes that will help them achieve the specified targets.

The theory of change was lauded by Weiss as practical and effective to communities engaged in transformation efforts. The Organisational Research Services (ORS) (2004) succinctly summarizes this theory of change:

> *Every community needs a roadmap for change. Instead of bridges, avenues and freeways, this map would illustrate destinations of progress and the routes to travel on the way to achieving progress. The map would also provide commentary about assumptions, such as the final destination, the context for the map, the processes to engage in during the journey and the belief system that underlies the importance of travelling in a particular way. This type of map is called a "theory of change".*

This theory is a clear road map for change, sometimes referred to as the *logic model* it guides those engaged in the change process. The theory of change ensures that those engaged on a journey to change process do not lose their direction. It is unthinkable to contemplate the success of any transformation guidelines without clear guidelines: the theory of change. One of the useful techniques of the theory of change is to employ an outcome map which is a visual diagram that spells out relationships between initiative strategies and intended results. The theory of change usually yields two products: An outcome map and a list of assumptions about change (ORS, 2004). Therefore, Weiss's theory of change is an approach that shows why an initiative works or does not (Connell and Klem 2000). Moreover, the theory of change seeks to improve how programs are implemented. The researchers in this paper develop a model after looking at theory such as the ones explored above. This follows their study of the SSIP in South Africa (Setlhako & Msila, 2013). However, here they illustrate how the SSIP can be improved using the *Theory of Change*.

3. Objectives of the Study

The researchers sought to develop a study that would:

- Use evaluation theory to develop a model;
- Investigate how the *Theory of Change* enhance policy initiatives;
- Examine ways of strengthening the steps in evaluation of a program; and
- Suggest a model that would address some of the challenges in program evaluation of education programs such as the SSIP.

4. The SSIP in Brief

This section briefly explores the SSIP to put the model discussed into context. The SSIP is a program introduced by the Department of Basic Education in South Africa. Its main purpose is to improve the results of poorly performing schools. Setlhako and Msila (2013) study's findings showed that the SSIP was poorly implemented and there was no effective evaluation of the program. Having studied various evaluation authors especially Carol Weiss, the researchers developed the model below. On the 9th of March 2013 the Gauteng minister of education Ms. Creecy announced the expansion of the Secondary School Improvement Program to over 300 000 secondary school learners. The South African Government Information (2013) quoted the minister as saying: "SSIP is symbolic of the Gauteng Department of Education's determination to lift the quality of education in schools and to see improved levels of achievement, particularly in those schools which have struggled to consistently achieve the benchmarks we have set for the province".

The unequal distribution of resources and other multifaceted factors in African schools have been found to affect the performance of learners which then result in schools performing very poorly. In addition, the MEC for Education in Gauteng stated that in order to sustain the improvement of learners' performance in matric, it was imperative to ensure that learners who are currently in Grades 10 and 11 in the same underperforming school are also provided additional support (GDE Report, 2010). The classification of schools as underperforming emerged from matric results of the previous year dropping by 10% compared to a current year, and/or when the school produces less than 70% pass rate. The MEC in Gauteng reported in 2010 that the program will run over a four year period while the department increases the capacity of the underperforming schools and educators to improve learners' performance.

The SSIP provides learners in underperforming schools with additional lessons on weekends and also on alternate weekdays. Learners in underperforming schools in one area are clustered and bussed to a common venue so that all classes can start on time and learners benefit. In order to encourage and motivate learners to attend additional classes, they are provided with food so as to sustain their concentration in the afternoon. The SSIP offers additional classes and support in a variety of subjects in which learners underperformed in the previous year. The subjects in which learners under performed in the previous year cover Mathematics, Mathematics Literacy, Accounting, Physical Science, Life Sciences and English (First Additional Language).

However, the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) employed the services of Sci-Bono Discovery Centre, to provide the development of learning material, manage and administer the SSIP and training of tutors to facilitate extra classes in the listed subjects. The program is offered free, at no cost to all Grades 10 - 12 learners. According to the SSIP Handbook, the additional classes were required to have been held on weekends, thus Saturday mornings from April, throughout the school recess in June – July and until September.

5. The SWIM Evaluation Model

The literature above shows the complexities that one finds in evaluation. The researchers developed the following model after conducting a study where a school intervention program was investigated. The common aspects in all failing projects are the lack of evaluation. The evaluation conducted here was not commissioned by any government department; in fact, there was never an evaluation of the SSIP before. Yet this study sought to improve the SSIP and also generate new knowledge hence the model in this paper. This suggested model can potentially cover what Weiss refers to as the *enlightenment* aim of evaluation. Sometimes evaluations are conducted to inform policy and this suggested model is also suggested to inform this policy. The SSIP should not be lost to the struggling schools simply because there is no proper evaluation of the program. Whilst on the one hand the suggested model hopes to improve policy, on the other it also seeks to see the SSIP improved. On the one hand there is a linear movement of stages from Districts' Initiation to the final stage of Summative Evaluation. However, there is an ongoing process evaluation that seeks to explore that all

the stages of the model are whether they are on the right track or not. The current SSIP has no known evaluation that follows the program. The combination of formative and summative assessment in this model is also crucial because both of these ask specific questions in the evaluation of the evaluated program. Babbie and Mouton (2009: 338-339) highlights the importance of improvement-oriented evaluations as he states that, "such evaluation asks different questions: What are the program's strength and weaknesses? Has the program been properly implemented? What constraints are there on proper implementation? Are the program recipients responding positively to the intervention? If not, why not?"

This suggested model suggests various approaches to the evaluation of the SSIP. Whilst the SSIP was appraised, the researcher picked up some of the weaknesses in the program. However, the main flaw in the SSIP is the absence of a model to evaluate the program. The researcher used theory from tested models of evaluation from experts such as McDonald, Patton and Babbie (2009). Figure 1. below the model is spelt out and its steps are explained.
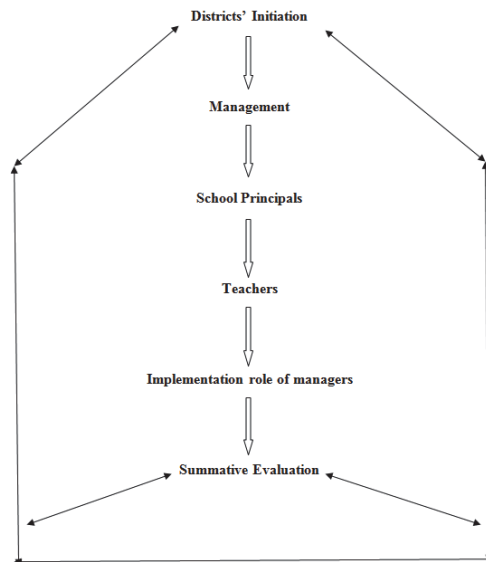

Fig.1 The School Wide Improvement Model (SWIM)

6. Explicating the School Wide Improvement Model (SWIM)

The SWIM graphically represented in Fig. 1 above is a suggested model that seeks to explore how programs meant for school improvement can be initiated and sustained. The major challenges with the SSIP were that it appeared to have overlooked some of the necessary fundamental steps. The SSIP also appears to be a silver bullet yet we cannot have a "one size fits all" approach to school problems. If districts do not train principals who know the diversity in their schools we will not achieve the accomplishments necessary for learner success. Models drawn should always take into cognisance the nature of society in which schools are built. Moreover, new models should always accommodate the various stakeholders and instill collaboration whenever possible. The SWIM is an attempt to see how these ideals can be attained.

School reforms need to accommodate the 21st century learner. Among others, innovations that do not promote critical thinking will be deemed useless by the demands of the society. The SWIM seeks to attain the following:

- Define the role of the main actors in school reform; the districts;
- Examine how collaboration can result in a well-run program;
- Magnify the role of school principals as instructional leaders in learner achievement;
- Stress the importance of a well-executed evaluation of an education program; and
- Appreciate the role of both process and summative evaluations.

School reform should be targeting the success of all learners. It should not concentrate on a single grade and this is the problem with the SSIP because it is focused on grade 12 results improvement. It is unethical to leave learners in failing schools to depend on fate for 11 years and then try to mend the damage in the last year of theory school career.

This model also seeks to underscore the importance of training more teachers than merely tutors in the SSIP. For schools to be accountable and professional all teachers need to be empowered constantly. Many of the school districts in South Africa are under pressure to succeed. Many of them have historically black African learners from poor families. The SWIM was developed after looking at research based evidence from this study. The decision to draw this model though could have happened without the use of any research because some authors such as Weiss *et al.* 2005 and Birkeland *et al.* 2005) have asserted that some decisions can be made without any research evidence. Below, the focus is on the various components of the SWIM.

6.1 Districts Offices' Initiation

Before any program to be used to improve schools can be implemented district officials should buy into an endeavour to transform schools. The SSIP is supposed to be one of the flagship program of all the districts. Yet it did not appear to be well supported by the officials who had different views on the SSIP and its necessity. In a sub-topic below discussion is on developing teachers as instructional leaders. That notion starts at the district officials' offices. For teachers to be finally autonomous and empowered, district officials should play a role. The SSIP cannot be successful when districts do not play a major role in its implementation and sustenance. There was no evidence of the district offices' initiating and supporting the SSIP in this study. In fact, the districts' role was so silent that one wondered what role the districts played for the implementation of the SSIP. Mitgang (2013) writes about the role of districts in the United States of America's schools as she states that districts should support strong leaders to the fullest if schools are to improve. The SSIP appears to have been perceived as a "quick fix" to failing schools. Yet the program concentrates only on one grade for a few months. Many learners have been exposed to underperforming, uncommitted teachers throughout their school careers and arguably, a few months can hardly make them unlearn the damage done in the earlier grades. Mitgang points out that we need to see a research-established link between specific district steps to promote leadership and improvements in learner achievement. This author also states that in many aspects of school reform there are few quick fixes and much hard work ahead. This model magnifies the role of districts in school reform. It should start with responsible district offices or else nothing will be achieved.

The SSIP shows a missed opportunity for many districts. The districts need to be involved in setting the standards needed for school success and learner achievement. Usually the school leaders are dependent upon their instincts in steering their schools towards success. Districts need a blue print to guide their schools and list what they need to achieve the national goals of education. Principals cannot be left to use their discretion in guiding schools. The districts should play the role in that guidance.

6.2 Department of Education Management and Schools

The officials based in district offices such as the subject advisors and the IDSOs (formerly known as inspectors) should lead in programs such as the SSIP. Public education would hardly experience the necessary revolution without the involvement of officials such as those cited above. Effective and meaningful school reform needs to be coordinated by departmental officials. Unfortunately, with the SSIP discussed in this study, there was no evidence of direct involvement by the department of education officials apart from the managers in charge of programs. This lack of involvement shows the lack of communication by the education department of its own programs. The SSIP involvement should have been mandatory for all middle managers working with schools. The absence of networks in the SSIP makes it a very weak initiative. There is lack of collaboration and lack of communication among the stakeholders; moreover, the functions are not well defined. The faint collaboration that is there is spoilt by the lack of common vision by the role-players. This is what Ladwig (2013) refers to as "blinding array of reform networks". The SWIM also shows the sociological task of school reforms which emphasizes the involvement of all these role-players. Ladwig (2013:12) argues:

> It is common sense to speak of student outcomes as a product of schooling, but it is equally important to keep in mind that students are not the only group to extract capital from schooling: educators' (including teachers, administrators, researchers, and policy agents) salaries, career trajectories and personal benefits, politicians' uses of educational policy, families' investment and realisation, and so forth, are all capitals extracted from schooling.

It is in this sense that the SWIM includes all the various stakeholders in the evaluation of a program. The SSIP is failing because it is not realising that learning is propelled by many other factors and role-players outside the school. The SSIP appears to be focusing only on subject teachers and the learners. The latter is among its major flaws as the findings

of this study revealed.

6.3   The School Principals

One of the things that districts officials should support is to make sure that all principals especially those in failing schools become instructional leaders. If the department of education can invest more in the training of principals many schools might succeed. Current research is beginning to show that effective schools will be those that have strong principals with sound leadership skills. Msila (2013) has shown how effective school principals who are instructional leaders can make their teachers succeed in attaining excellence. In this study Msila illustrated how principals who are "hands on" can change the failure in their schools to success. Yunas and Iqbal's (2013) study In Pakistan also found similar findings in their study of the multi-dimensional role of principals. These authors accent that there are few studies in developing countries on the role of instructional leadership. Yunas and Iqbal (2013:629) argue:

> Instructional is the core technology of school, which depends largely on teaching strategies for the implementation of the prescribed curriculum. Thus effective teaching-learning process, timely implementation of curriculum and modus operandi of the activities within the classroom are some of the elements that are considered in the process of instructional supervision. In order to have this supervision meaningful school leadership ought to have necessary professional knowledge and skills for the performance of this function.

There was however, a conspicuous absence of school principals in the planning and implementation of the SSIP though. In fact, the principals have no role in the program. However, as research shows if more instructional leaders are included there can be less spending by the department of education because principals can support their teachers through professional development programs. The SSIP can potentially be a huge success if the principals can be made part of the planning and support for underprepared teachers. In fact, the SSIP appears to be very superficial and if principals are trained well as instructional practitioners the department would have invested in teachers for a number of years. The district officials should also think of training more principals for teacher support. In this SSIP Model the school principals' role is emphasized because when principals "buy into" any improvement program linked with the curriculum, they can win their teachers. The problem with the the SSIP is that it only concentrates on the tutors and the learners from "failing" schools.

The SSIP should not be solely about raining the matric pass rate; it should also sustain longevity where all teachers, teaching all grades should be able to be supported. It will be pointless even if the teachers who are SSIP tutors are empowered in the program's sites they might be despondent if their principals do not know what they are doing. If teachers have embraced novel ways of teaching and their principals not, this would defeat the purpose of learner achievement. The SSIP organizers missed a vital link by not involving the school principals in their planning. The principal is pivotal in school improvement. In fact, Bush (2007) argues that a school will be as successful as its principal. "The well-defined instructional leader supervises and evaluates all staff members by collaborating with them to set instructional goals and objectives and by meeting with them to check their progress. He/she facilitates instruction by supporting teachers who have innovative ideas and by making instruction a priority in terms of time" (Yunas and Iqbal 2013: 630).

6.4   Developing teachers

Another major flaw in the SSIP is the concentration on matric pupils. The program is more about developing them, making sure that they do well in the examinations. Yet when these pupils pass many teachers in failing schools are still on the same place where they were before the program. In programs such as the SSIP, there should also be more concentration on developing teachers because this has longevity and more schools benefit. The SSIP ends up being an expensive short term solution when it does include the training of the teachers in general. Teachers need to be professionally developed at all times.

6.5   Implementation role of (education department) managers

The Strategic Plan of the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) argues for effective implementation of education innovation. In this Quality Learning and Teaching Campaign (QLTC) to support teacher change. These are which was launched in 2008the DBE involved a social compact between a number of role-players. Trust and mutual respect are some of the prerequisites for the development of the right teacher policies and effective implementation of

new policies (DBE 2010). The Department of Basic Education envisages a system where there will be support during implementation of programs in collaboration with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), provinces and relevant stakeholders. This includes monitoring and coordination as well as strategies to support teacher change. These are sound plans that could be instituted in implementing any innovations. Paradoxically though, the SSIP was not implemented well when one assesses its introduction. The teachers were mere implementers of a program they were not part of even in formulation.

The SWIM seeks to stress the importance of seeing teachers as partners in collaboration with other stakeholders. In the discussion above we have seen how teachers tend to be told what they need to implement in the schooling program of their children. History in South Africa has shown that when implementation in education excludes teachers, there are bound to be problems. Arguably, this is due to the absence of the application of theory of implementation. Majone and Wildavsky (1995) perceive implementation as evolution. These authors add that there should be no separation of policy design from implementation for this is a fatal mistake. Perhaps, this is the reason why some educational innovations fail in South Africa; there is a gap between policy and implementation. Furthermore, Majone and Wildavsky also suggest merging policy and implementation to curb any forms of confusion. In the SWIM as the policy is designed the formulators need to have an idea of how it would be implemented.

The SWIM supports the notion of implementation as evolutionary. "Since it takes place in a world we never made , we are usually right in the middle of the process, with events having occurred before and (we hope) continuing afterward" (Majone & Wildavsky 1995: 150). When we capture this notion policy theory is constantly transformed to produce results. The problem with the SSIP is the absence of these check and balances in implementation. The implementation is not focused and is rigid. However, implementation is always affected by those in power who usually want to show that power and control. Perhaps this is the reason Bardach (1995) coined the phrase *implementation game*. This author points out that during implementation there are so many features that tend to aggravate and exaggerate underlying conflicts. "They lead us to a critical insight about the implementation process: the maneuvers aimed at reducing it there is an associated risk of actually making matters worse". The SWIM tries to lessen the aggravating factors of this implementation game.

7. Conclusion

This paper examined evaluation theory, specifically Carol Weiss whose *Theory of Change* emphasizes the complexity of evaluation. Effective evaluations can be hindered by a number of challenges and this is the reason why evaluators need to be certain that they use correct evaluation procedures. The SWIM is suggested for a particular program which is the SSIP but the principles can be applicable to any program that is being evaluated. The SWIM supports social change and as Weiss stated it, the SWIM follows a drawn map which is invaluable for evaluators who would like to apply the *Theory of Change* in their research.

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