

Evaluative capacity building: A conceptual framework for engaging decision-makers and program participants in new ways

Joanne Lunn Brownlee¹, Jennifer Sumsion², Sharon Ryan³, Donna Berthelsen¹, Ann Farrell¹, Susan Irvine¹, Gerry Mulhearn², and Kerryann Walsh¹

¹Queensland University of Technology, ² Charles Sturt University, ³ Rutgers University

Unprecedented policy attention to early childhood education internationally has highlighted the crucial need for a skilled early years workforce. Consequently, the professional development of early years educators has become a global policy imperative. In contrast to calls for a redesign of comparative studies of professional development programs, or for the refinement of researcher-constructed professional development evaluation frameworks, we argue the need to cultivate what we refer to as an 'evaluative stance' through evaluation capacity building (ECB) amongst all involved in making decisions about professional development in the early years – from senior bureaucrats with responsibilities for funding professional development programs to individual educators with choices about which professional development opportunities to take up. We define an evaluative stance as both a mindset and skillset that promotes critical reflection during decision making processes. This evaluative stance also needs to be evident within the broader system and organisation as a whole.

We propose a new conceptual model that draws on and connects two broad bodies of literature that, for the most part, have been overlooked with respect to promoting an evaluative stance in early years professional development: evaluation capacity building (ECB) and personal epistemology in adult learning.

ECB is about learning how to take an evaluative stance in decision making (Preskill & Boyle, 2008). A range of ECB models exist (see for example Labin, 2014; Preskill & Boyle, 2008) and of these, most acknowledge that personal and situational factors influence the implementation of ECB strategies in organisations, leading to organizational outcomes such as sustainable evaluation practices (Preskill & Boyle) and a range of individual, organization and program outcomes (Labin, 2014). Most ECB models recognize the significance of the role of adult learning and how ECB is essentially related to evaluation for learning (Taut, 2007). A key focus in evaluation models is therefore about how evaluators can support learning using ECB. We argue that while there is a clear focus on personal factors such as needs, attitudes, motivations, and assumptions and on the need to focus on adult learning in the current ECB models, there remains a lack of theorization about learning itself.

One personal factor which is theorised to influence adult learning in general relates to personal epistemologies - the beliefs individuals hold about the nature of knowing and knowledge. We argue that an innovative way to theorise adult learning in ECB models is to focus on personal epistemology as a factor that mediates how child care leaders and educators engage in critical reflection during decision making processes. To date, research has shown clear links between sophisticated personal epistemologies (a view that knowledge is constructed by evaluating multiple perspectives) and critical thinking and we argue that a focus on personal epistemology in ECB can provide a new way to understand evaluative mindsets and skills sets for effective decision making. While we are yet to test our conceptualisation empirically, we propose that cultivating an evaluative stance through a focus on personal epistemology in professional development decision-making has rich possibilities for systemic, sustainable, and transformative change to professional development in early years education.