



Using client exit interviews to illuminate outcomes in program logic models: a case example

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Abstract

This paper describes how client exit interviews can assist human service administrators and workers to better understand the outcomes their programs are designed to accomplish. Specifically, the qualitative component of a demonstration family literacy program evaluation is used to illustrate how client input can be used to fine-tune the outcomes component of a program's logic model. An analysis of semi-structured exit interviews with 35 clients, who were randomly selected from all 89 served in the first year of the program, resulted in revision to the program's original logic model, creating explicit 'testable' pathways to achieving intended outcomes. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

What outcomes is your program striving for? How is your program carried out? or How well is your program doing what it claims? Questions like these are more commonly asked of human service programs since the passing of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) in August 1993. The clout of this legislation has program administrators searching, more than ever, for ways to describe and evaluate program service delivery and its associated outcomes. This paper describes an approach to evaluation that highlights client exit interview data as a tool for developing client-oriented program outcomes within the framework of a program logic model.

A major purpose of describing human service programs is to communicate to interested stakeholders a model of service (Rutman, 1980; Wholey, 1979). In simplest terms, this involves articulating a program's intentions for solving identified problems, as well as its plans for achieving what it has set out to do. For example, programs for battered women generally aim to reduce physical harm to women and their children (i.e. the intention) by providing counseling, support and life-skills training in a protected shelter that has an undisclosed location (i.e. plan for achieving the intention).

There are different approaches to describing programs (e.g. Rush & Osborne, 1991; Rutman, 1980; United Way

of America, 1996; Unrau, Gabor, & Grinnel, 2001; Wholey, 1979), but most have in common the notion of constructing a program model. Implicit in each program model is a theory of client change; that is, a plausible and logical explanation of how a program aims to produce observed changes in client outcomes (McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999).

Program modeling is often overlooked in this era of accountability as the glare of the public eye focuses intensely on measuring outcomes. The question of 'Did clients change?' wins out over 'How did client change occur?' or 'Was the change meaningful to client well-being and quality of life?' Yet, giving attention solely to the first question can put client well being at risk. Imagine for a moment that outcome measurement was used exclusively to evaluate mental health programs serving families of schizophrenic youth in the 1950s. At the time, the mental health community embraced the double-bind theory of schizophrenia, which was to say that inconsistent and contradictory communication sequences between parents and children led to the development of schizophrenia in adolescence (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956). In evaluation vernacular, this theory might have been recast so that programs serving such a client population would have been aimed at reducing adolescents' bizarre behavior (i.e. the intention) by improving parent-child communication (i.e. plan for achieving the intention). Giving attention only to the outcome—reducing adolescents' bizarre behavior—risks examining behavioral change independently of the theoretical plan (i.e. the program model) to create the

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desired change. A possible consequence of separating process and outcome is to persevere with faulty theory, which increases the risk of hammering clients with ineffective interventions that may be unrelated to their problems.

Program modeling is central to investigating what interventions work in human service programs (Hatry, 1999). For this reason, purposeful efforts are needed to develop and modify program outcomes by giving due consideration to the program's broader context. Research on complex social problems such as child abuse, illiteracy, and poverty generally occurs amidst often-chaotic environments in which such social problems exist. A 'window of opportunity' to investigate social problems, the people they inflict, and any interventions tried is program models in operation. Whether clients move through programs voluntarily or involuntarily, they expect to be changed in some beneficial way. This anticipated transformation is explicitly tied to program objectives (or outcomes) when logic models are used as program-organizing tools.

This paper describes how a program with limited resources created a basic program logic model in its demonstration year and illustrates how client feedback was then used to fine-tune the outcomes component of the model. Specifically, qualitative client exit interview data from a rural family literacy program¹ is presented and used to discern 'testable' pathways to achieving positive client change. The richness of exit interview data also shed light on principal program activities and gave hints as to which activities were possibly linked to favorable outcomes.

The evaluation strategy described in this paper seeks input from an underutilized stakeholder group—the clients—and is presented in the spirit of using outcome-oriented data to help program workers focus on their intended achievements (Hatry, 1999). It is a strategy that complements other evaluation approaches but because it is based on client perception alone, it is not recommended as a sole source of evaluation data.

2. Setting the stage for evaluation: building a program logic model

The case example described here, namely the family literacy program, was made possible by two semi-retired public school teachers who recognized that children in their rural communities were suffering from poor literacy skills and that literacy services were either absent or scarce. These two women successfully obtained a modest demonstration grant that came with a mandate to develop, implement, and evaluate their innovative program idea within a one-year period. In turn, they signed on an evaluation

consultant to assist with the project. Thus, this case example is presented on a familiar stage; one where program developers and evaluators faced pressures of time constraints, lofty service and evaluation expectations, and finite resources.

Not unlike other human services, there exists little consensus on evaluation practices for family literacy programs (Thomas & Fisher, 1995). The family literacy program evaluation was guided by a program structure and logic model that requires a program be fully described according to its goal, objectives, and activities—the minimum amount of detail necessary to produce meaningful evaluation output intent (Unrau, 1993; Unrau et al., 2001). Briefly, *goals* identify the program's purpose, *objectives* specify intended outcomes, and *activities* spell out purposeful actions by program workers that attempt to influence outcomes positively.

The creation of the family literacy program's logic model was a process involving participation from multiple stakeholders. The initial model was created at a one-day workshop that involved 20 stakeholders from various constituencies, including the program itself (i.e. steering committee members, administration, and literacy workers), neighboring services (i.e. public school teachers, child welfare, and workers and clients from other literacy programs), and local community citizens. All stakeholders were keen to assist with program development and were characterized by the evaluation consultant as 'evaluation-receptive,' which made it possible to use a consensus decision-making approach to reach agreement on key aspects of program design and evaluation within a short timeframe. Having the evaluation consultant and program stakeholders work together throughout the evaluation process served to empower the latter (Fetterman, 1994; Ryan, Geissler, & Knell, 1996).

Five significant products were produced at the one-day participatory workshop, and each served a function in clarifying key program parameters, as well as direction for the evaluation. First, an organizational chart that mapped out staff positions according to their ascribed roles was constructed. Second, a list of philosophical statements was composed to express the stakeholders' shared beliefs and assumptions about client service delivery. Examples include 'parents are partners in their child's literacy learning' and 'learning is fun.' Third, a brainstorm-list of evaluation questions was generated and then later consulted to develop data collection tools for the program. Fourth, the program's goal and objectives were formed. Finally, an inventory of program activities or interventions for use by literacy workers was produced and subsequently used to develop program training materials. The fourth and fifth workshop products formed the basic components of the program structure and logic model upon which the evaluation was based.

A program goal provides the overarching vision for services by identifying the social problem being tackled, the specific target population being addressed, the general

¹ This article was based on an evaluation of the *Building Blocks* family literacy program in Vulcan, Alberta, which was funded by the National Literacy Secretariat of Canada. The generic name family literacy program is used in the article because the ideas for program development are not specific to *Building Blocks*.

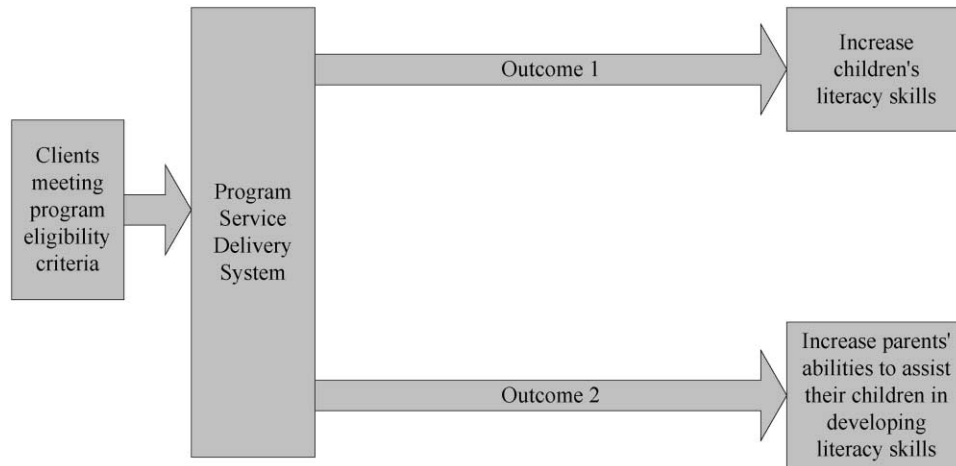


Fig. 1. Illustration of basic program model.

desired state of change, and the strategy to achieve this change (Unrau et al., 2001). Specifically, the family literacy program goal developed and agreed to by stakeholders was:

To instill a positive attitude toward lifelong learning among families with young children living in [specified rural area]. The program is aimed at families who need support in developing positive learning environments at home—especially where there is a lack of emergent literacy skills. The program promotes literacy by providing literacy strategies to parents and children in their own homes.

In turn, the program's goal was measured via two objectives, which articulate the intended outcomes of the program. Stakeholders agreed that the program should aim to:

1. increase literacy skills of children; and
2. increase parent(s)' abilities to assist their children in developing literacy skills.

Fig. 1 displays a simplified, and arguably incomplete, program structure and logic model to convey the basic intent of the program. Specifically, Fig. 1 depicts that clients who meet program eligibility criteria are expected to increase in two outcome areas *after* receiving program services. A more complete program logic model would detail the relationships between program inputs, throughputs, outputs, and outcomes. The simpler visual is presented here primarily because of the outcomes focus of this paper. However, it also demonstrates that exit interview data can yield meaningful evaluation data in programs that are either underdeveloped or are built from scratch with only the bare essentials of construction materials. Both conditions were at play for this case example.

Client eligibility criteria referred to in Fig. 1 were inclusive in that all families—especially with children who were lacking emergent literacy skills—needing help to develop

positive home learning environments were eligible. Additionally, families had to reside within one of nine designated rural counties in order to receive services. The program's client service delivery system, represented by the middle box in Fig. 1, is a complex intermingling of program structures, personnel, resources, and activities that are part-and-parcel of program operations. Organizational charts and philosophical statements mentioned earlier were tools that gave details about unique program features. The overall essence of service delivery, however, is captured in the following portrayal of a 'typical' client family.

Mary and Jack Sr. live with their three children aged 4, 7, and 9 years in a rural town of 800 people. Jack Sr. is a self-employed farmer with a grade 10 education. Mary, a high school graduate, works at home full-time, but plans to return to part-time secretarial work when the youngest child enters grade one. Their oldest child, Jack Jr. is performing poorly at school, which leads to his teacher making a referral to the program. The initial program contact is conducted by telephone and leads to an in-home visit.

The first in-home visit constitutes the intake meeting, and information between Mary and two program representatives (the coordinator and a literacy worker) is exchanged. Mary learns that the program offers four weeks of service whereby the literacy worker will visit 5 days per week for 15 min each time. The literacy worker explains that the purpose of her visits will be twofold: to improve Jack Junior's literacy skills (Outcome 1), and to increase Mary and Jack Sr.'s ability to help all their children develop stronger literacy skills (Outcome 2). To accomplish these objectives, the literacy worker explains that she will engage Mary (since she is the full-time caretaker) and Jack Jr. (since he is the target child) in a variety of literacy activities for 15 min every visit. The literacy

worker will also offer literacy-related ideas and suggestions to keep Jack Jr.'s two younger siblings occupied during sessions.

The literacy worker listens intently to learn about Mary and her children's interests and learning preferences. She then describes a variety of possible program activities such as teaching parents about different learning styles and bringing books, games, audio tapes, and other educational resources to the visits. She further explains that after each visit, family members will be given 'homework' exercises to practice newly acquired skills.

The literacy worker and Mary together decide the four-week schedule, which is to include 20 in-home visits. The literacy worker, however, underscores the value of a regular schedule to promote consistency as the family strives to develop daily literacy habits. During the first week of services, the literacy worker assumes most of the responsibility for planning and coordinating literacy activities. As the four-week service period progresses, however, the responsibility shifts to Mary as the worker gradually decreases her level of direct interaction.

Literacy workers lived in the communities where they worked and as such, the small program was spread over a wide geographic area. Workers were trained to focus on one or the other of the program's two outcomes during each family visit, and by the end of four weeks were to have given both outcomes about equal attention. Another critical aspect of service delivery is what workers did with families during the daily 15-min sessions that take place in the home. The variety of program activities or interventions is shown in Table 1, which displays the frequency of major activities used by workers. In short, the program intent was that worker activities would lead to progress on client outcomes.

The list in Table 1 was generated by tabulating daily activity checklists (developed from the inventory of program activities mentioned earlier) that were completed by workers after each family session. The checklist form required workers to identify the focus of each session (i.e. Outcome 1 or 2) as well as, the major intervention activities employed. Checklist data revealed that workers used an average of two activities per 15-min session. The type and frequency of activities varied across families as workers responded to individual family needs.

Overall, the family literacy program model serves an important function in guiding development of program activities and operations because it captures the fundamental relationship between clients, service delivery, and expected outcomes. It reminds workers of the program's goal and objectives and provides a common platform for all program staff as they provide client services and work to establish and evaluate the program in its formative stages

Table 1
Major program activities ($N = 87$ families)

Program activities or interventions	Median ^a	Range ^b
Paired reading	6	0–23
Modeling reading with children	5	0–25
Listening to parents concerns	5	0–16
Pointing out parents strengths in helping their kids	3	0–17
Teaching literacy games to family	3	0–16
Giving books, materials, and written information	2	0–26
Teaching parents about different reading styles	2	0–14
Teaching parents about child development	1	0–11
Identifying family priorities for kid activities	1	0–9
Filling out program questionnaires	1	0–3
Developing charts (e.g. stickers, reading checklists)	0	0–17
Teaching parents how to use resources (e.g. library)	0	0–12
Providing referrals to other agencies	0	0–1

^a Median times activity was used in family sessions over the duration of the program.

^b The most frequently cited reason for 0 frequency was that activity was age inappropriate.

of development. Further reworking of the program model is possible from data gathered through client exit interviews.

3. Evaluation method: client exit interviews

Exit interviews took place after families completed the four-week program and constituted the qualitative component² of the family literacy program's evaluation. Specifically, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with 35 (40%) of 89 clients served by the program in its first year of operation. Each of the 35 interview participants were randomly selected from quarterly client lists in an effort to ensure that the experiences of those interviewed were representative of all clients served over the year of the program.

Comparative analysis showed that clients interviewed versus not had similar demographic profiles. Overall, the majority of families served by the program was Caucasian and spoke English as their first language. In almost all families, mothers over 25 years old were the primary adult participants in the program. The two major referral sources were local schools and self-referrals. About two-thirds of families lived in rural townships, while the remainder lived in outlying farmland areas.

² The quantitative component of the evaluation involved a one-group pretest-posttest only design using non-standardized questionnaires to calculate change scores (see Unrau & Wehrmann, 2001).

Interviews were conducted via telephone, except in seven cases where face-to-face interviews were used because of weak English-speaking skills or, in one case, because a family did not have a telephone. Combining telephone and face-to-face interview methods allowed the author to honor the random selection of cases.

Telephone interviews were, on average, 20 min long. The interviewer using a telephone headset and computer was able to simultaneously conduct the interview and transcribe responses into a word processor. Face-to-face interviews, on the other hand, generally were lengthier and the interviewer relied on hand-written recordings that were later transcribed. All transcripts were nearly verbatim in an effort to capture expressions and descriptions in parents' own words. In all instances, recorded responses were read back to parents, allowing for modifications, deletions, and additions.

Exit interview questions focusing on outcomes asked participants to give concrete examples of any observed changes in both their children's literacy skills (Outcome 1) and their ability to assist their children in developing literacy skills (Outcome 2) given their experience and completion of the program. Data were later analyzed using a constant-comparison method, which essentially involved grouping meaningful units of text into similar categories. This process of comparing text units of interview responses took several iterations until common groupings and themes emerged. The analysis revealed that program benefits or outcomes as identified by parents went beyond the scope of the original program model depicted in Fig. 1.

4. Results: illuminating program outcomes

Client exit data are useful for illuminating and further developing program logic models. The themes generated from the family literacy program's exit interviews are presented below according to each of the program's intended outcomes. The responses provided by clients are then used to modify the original program model displayed in Fig. 1.

4.1. Outcome 1: increasing children's literacy skills

Overall, respondents provided a variety of examples to suggest that the program may have led to improvements in their children's literacy skills. In particular, parents reported their children were reading more, writing and telling stories better, showing greater interest in reading, and reading with greater ease. These descriptions of change not only were expected but also support the favorable client change detected via quantitative measures. Thus, in addition to claiming that parents showed a significant increase in how often they read to their children (i.e. from once or twice a week to about every other day), the program was able to supplement this statistically significant result (see Unrau &

Wehrmann, 2001) with the following words shared by a mother of a 10-year-old boy:

I think [the program] helped. I don't know on a scale exactly how much it helped but I do think it helped. I think it just kind of increased his enjoyment and he is getting more out of reading now. He used to hate to read and he would never do it. You just absolutely could not get him to sit down with a book. Now he will on occasion. Once his interest increased so did his literacy skills. He now will even pick up a box and read the directions out loud. He used to be very stubborn about not reading. The program helped him, helped us get past the problem. The [literacy worker] presented stuff in such a fun way, yet was also strong and let him know that he had to learn to read.

Exit interview data also revealed other positive change that went beyond the expected improvements of Outcome 1. For instance, parents gave specific examples of observed change in areas of their *children's self-confidence, school performance, and behavior*. Making the case for improved self-confidence among children, a mother of a 7-year-old girl said,

She doesn't like to try new things. She is very afraid of failure. This program showed her that she could do it and there is no stopping her now, even when we're driving down the street she reads everything in sight;

and a parent of a 7-year-old boy described how her son

still doesn't read on his own. [The program] helped his self-confidence. He *used to* think he was stupid.

With regard to improvement in school performance, a parent of a 6-year-old boy said that her son wanted 'to quit school and now he actually likes it.' Several parents commented that their children were earning higher grades on spelling tests at school since their participation in the program. One parent perceived the program to have had a particularly dramatic effect on her child's progress at school:

My son was in kindergarten and the first day back in January they put him in grade one. He was held back before because he was sick for 3 months. It was a surprise for me. We were thinking about him going to grade one but didn't know it was going to happen. The kindergarten teacher said the program was responsible for his advancement so quickly. He's counting numbers. His ABCs are a lot better. He's doing better at school.

Finally, parent observations also revealed that the program may have had a positive impact on child behavior. Another parent, for example, described her 6-year-old son as 'hardly being able to sit still at all,' and by the end [of the program] she noticed that 'he sits still for much longer periods.' In part, she attributed the decrease in fidgeting to the types of

activities the literacy worker introduced to the family, such as using audio taped reading and playing literacy games. A parent of a 5-year-old boy shared her perception that the worker had a positive impact on her son's problem behavior.

At first, he would kick and scratch, pound on [the literacy worker]. By the end of the program, he'd sit with her and play, sit on her lap. He would participate more. She was very flexible. One time it was very nice outside and he didn't want to come in. So, [the literacy worker] went outside to meet him in the yard. She worked with him there. He has more interest in books. He plays a lot better. He asks for a story at bedtime more often. Before he would ask for a story at bedtime, but was not able to sit still through the story. Now, he is more able to sit still and listen to the story.

4.2. Outcome 2: improving parents abilities to help children develop literacy skills

Another focus of exit interviews was to ask parents to comment on any changes in their ability to help develop their children's literacy skills. Responses revealed several illustrations directly related to the program's second intended outcome. Specifically, themes of improvement in parental ability included an increased repertoire of literacy games and teaching strategies, as well as better ways to recognize and praise children for engaging in pro-literacy activities (e.g. spelling out a 's-t-o-p' sign and reading a cereal box).

Similar to exit interview data for Outcome 1, parents descriptions of improvement also went outside the scope of Outcome 2. In addition to describing themes of improvement related to parents' abilities to help their children develop literacy skills, parents also talked about other benefits such as, *increased patience and understanding with their children, improvements in their own literacy skills, and better connections with their children's schools.*

Many examples of parent's increased patience and understanding with their children were provided. However, the following two responses capture the essence of this theme.

I now understand what is going on and how come she can't understand and can't read or write. I try to be more understanding and positive. I used to get mad when she would give me a phone message that I couldn't read. Now I say, 'Thank you for the message. I can't read it but it is a very nice message.' [The worker] has also given me different skills. I ask her questions about books now. (Parent of 12-year-old girl).

I was so frustrated with my son I wanted to scream ... [The worker] would listen to my problems. I didn't feel like it was just all me. Somebody else was around to help. [The worker] took time to listen and helped

me know what to do ... She had the patience to be helpful. She told me to give my son little jobs, encourage him, reward him but not 'go out and give him a burger.' Now I say 'good boy,' praise him but not go overboard. She would tell me what to do differently if I did something wrong. Before I'd lose my temper, but not so much anymore. I praise my son more. I am less frustrated. (Parent of a 5-year-old boy)

The original model for the family literacy program (Fig. 1) targeted children's literacy, yet there were also other positive outcomes for parents' literacy skills. Many parents believed that their own reading and comprehension had improved as a result of the program. One parent said:

Before I didn't pay much attention to words. I used to glance at a page but now I am paying more attention to the words; thinking about what they mean. I'm reading the [news] paper more and notice there's lots of tragedy. (Parent of a 6-year-old boy)

I can't even tell you how much [the program] helped me. I had no self-confidence myself. I wouldn't read to other children or my own children when others were around. I have the confidence to sit down with [my son] and say we can read together. I admitted to myself that I couldn't spell. I learned it was okay for my son to see my faults....I can tell my son, it's okay that Mom has trouble too. We can learn together. I said this before, but don't think he felt that I meant it. Now he can see it. I'm just not afraid to do it. (Parent of a 7-year-old boy).

Finally, parents also described how they perceived the program to help them connect with local schools. In general, parents learned to be proactive in approaching school-teachers regarding their children's learning needs. They also identified how important it is to understand what their children were learning at school to better assist with homework.

5. Illuminating program outcomes: revising the program model

The client exit interviews for the family literacy program provided rich examples of how the program's two intended outcomes (as displayed in Fig. 1) were achieved. The six additional outcomes that emerged from the exit interview data also provided valuable material for better understanding pathways to achieving the program's originally stated outcomes. Fig. 2 displays a revised program model that is a more complex and sophisticated illustration of the program's intent, but continues to be plausible, logical and consistent with the program's goal.

Revising a program model is a process that begins by assessing the value and place of each modification. That

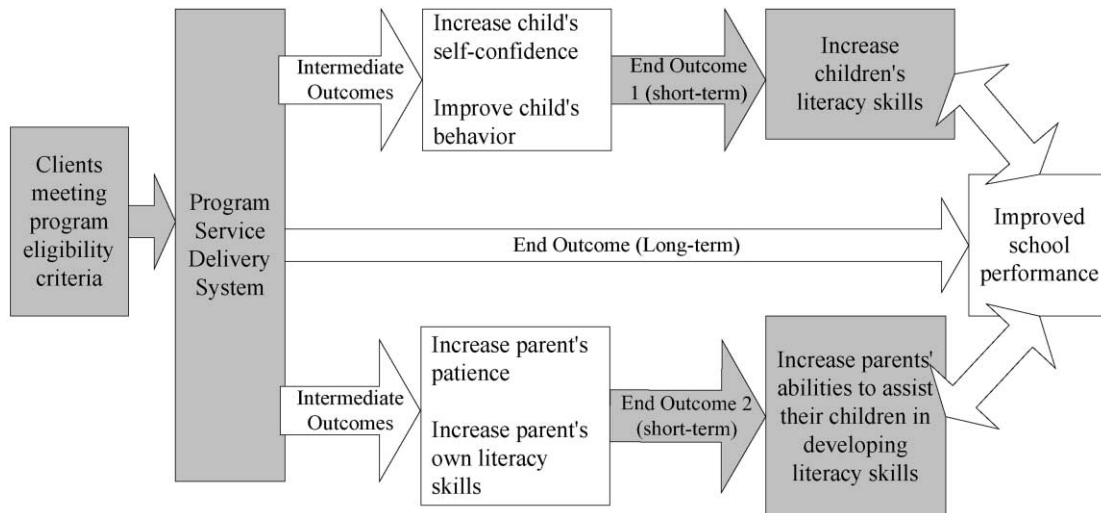


Fig. 2. Illustration of revised program model.

is, the conceptual scheme of the program must be revisited, giving consideration to adding outcomes or creating new pathways to existing ones. Additionally, any outcome adjustments to the model must be done in reference to the program's current client profile and existing service delivery system.

A distinction between intermediate and end outcomes is used to reorganize how outcomes are conceptualized in the revised program model presented in Fig. 2. Intermediate outcomes identify results that are believed to lead to the program's desired end result, but are not end results in themselves (Hatry, 1999). In turn, end outcomes are the final targeted results that clients of the program are expected to achieve. In Fig. 2, the two original program outcomes are dubbed 'short-term end outcomes,' a name that implies that they remain desirable results for clients and can be achieved in the brief time span of the program. A long-term end outcome of improving school performance, however, is added because it fits with the notion that improved literacy among children will lead to greater achievements at school. This desirable outcome, however, may not immediately show itself in the short-range of the program. Rather, the term of the school year and not the term of the literacy program limit its measurement. Adding a long-term end outcome to the revised model is beneficial because it places the program in the broader continuum of clients' lives.

The four intermediate outcomes added to Fig. 2 were based on the ancillary examples of change as told by parents in their exit interviews. These intermediate outcomes flesh out testable pathways to achieving intended short- and long-term end outcomes. That is, the idea of improving children's self-confidence and behavior are considered transitional steps leading to the end result of increased literacy skills for children. Similarly, increasing parents' patience with their children and improving their literacy skills is likely to assist parents to better help their children develop literacy skills.

Including intermediate outcomes in the model explicitly identifies preferred pathways to achieving successful change in end outcomes. Intermediate outcomes permit programs to test hypotheses about producing client change without revamping the entire direction of the program with each outcome modification. While we might expect improvements in children's behavior to lead to better literacy skills, this assumption is uncertain. Constructing the program model as it is presented in Fig. 2 assists administrators and workers to design future evaluations to test theory that is otherwise implicit in the model.

Adding intermediate outcomes to the program model also has the benefit of distinguishing key program features without risking 'drift' from the program goal. For example, the notions of improving children's behavior and self-confidence, and parents' patience with their children are noble targets for change, but they do not directly reflect the goal of the family literacy program. Indeed, these intermediate goals could fit in most other human service program models designed to serve families. While the intermediate outcomes are thought to be important to the family literacy program, they ought not steal the spotlight of the program's purpose, or goal; that is to improve literacy.

Without a doubt, the model in Fig. 2 could easily have been drafted by a seasoned literacy expert in short order and without the involvement of program stakeholders. The value of creating this model from client input and with worker involvement, however, is just as much a part of the model as the visual display of it. In this example, plans for change emerged from 'street-level' client experiences that are direct reflections of worker efforts. This source of feedback is valued by workers who are invested in having their clients do well. Getting stakeholders, particularly workers, to buy into the program's model may also have positive implications for staff morale, worker productivity, and quality of service delivery. Another benefit of exit interview data is that they offer insight to the inner workings of the program,

as well as outcomes. Specifically, parents' observations of change related to outcomes are accompanied by strong clues about helpful interventions. The parent who was so frustrated with her son that she wanted to scream, for example, also exclaimed that '[the worker] took time to listen and helped me know what to do.' Indeed, 'listening to parent's concerns' was the third most frequently cited activity by workers (see Table 1).

6. Lessons learned

Given the very nature of evaluation is about improvement, it is fitting to reflect on the evaluation itself and consider noteworthy lessons therefrom. The learning gained from the evaluation of the literacy program are fourfold. First, it seems that client exit interview data are cut from the same cloth as satisfaction data. Hatry (1999) estimates that 85–90% of clients will rate their experiences with a program as satisfying. Indeed, interview participants from the literacy program gave very few negative or critical comments about the program. As such, it is imperative that interview data are explicit and concrete and not simply platitudes. For example, if a parent says 'this program definitely made a difference for us,' an interviewer must probe for specific examples to capture the unique detail of the experience and not just a general sense of client satisfaction.

Second, it was mentioned that the model of the family literacy program was more complex than the conceptual illustrations of Fig. 1 or Fig. 2. Indeed, both stages of the model oversimplify outcome success or failure as being mediated by the program's services. While such causal conclusions are properly reserved for randomized experimental testing, program administrators, workers, and clients alike assume this service-leads-to-outcomes link as clients move through the program.

Wholey (1979) introduced the notion that programs must have clearly defined objectives before they can be evaluated. This conditional view has served many programs well by requiring the articulation of goals and objectives. Ideally, program objectives are derived from theory; building on testable assumptions through their application. Theory on human behavior, however, is vast, competing, and not always subject to empirical testing. Furthermore, theory testing takes considerable time, a commodity that is sparse in many human service programs. Realistically, administrators and practitioners must pool together available resources of theory, research, practice wisdom, and develop their programs in response to current political conditions and funding demands. Without an explicit program model, it is impossible to monitor program outcomes in relation to program services. While programs must be sound and mechanisms for program monitoring and feedback in place if text data are to be useful for revising program models, this case example demonstrates that client exit interviews can yield meaningful formative evaluation data

for programs with limited resources and in their early stages of development.

Third, regardless of the amount of detail or strength of opinion collected, interview data are not evidence that the program caused client change but rather are helpful feedback for fine-tuning aspects of the program (Rossi & Freeman, 1993). An important question of program evaluation is whether changes experienced by clients resulted from the program or other sources. Rossi and Freeman (1993) use the term gross outcomes to describe changes in clients that would have occurred regardless of the program and net outcomes to describe changes that are attributed to the program. While the preferred method to discern the net outcome of a program is randomized experimentation (Rossi & Freeman, 1993), text data also have value. Specifically, they give insight into what influence a program can reasonably claim for changes in outcomes. In addition to asking for specific examples of change, clients can also tell us about other factors that may have a role in creating change. A parent who reports that her child has improved spelling at school, for example, might also add that her child has a new teacher this year, or perhaps the child received extra tutoring at school. On the other hand, the parent might offer the explanation that nothing worked before the program (or its worker) came along. The aim of such probing is to gain a fuller picture of experience and not to draw definitive conclusions. Of course, a logical next stage of evaluation is to empirically test such proposed links.

Finally, the value of any evaluation effort is enhanced when a participatory approach involving multiple stakeholders is used to develop and monitor a program logic model. Revisions made to the program model over time chronicle distinct phases of program development, ideally showing a program model that is evolving into a dependable and robust system of client service delivery. Over time, the aim of evaluation can shift from improving the description of the program model to testing specific components of it. For example, stakeholders of the literacy program may wish to experiment with different approaches to listening to clients concerns to determine if one listening strategy is more effective than another, or has differential effects depending on client characteristics. A sound program model anchors stakeholders with a common tether and makes navigation of the next leg of evaluation a planned, purposeful, and more rewarding experience.

7. Summary

This paper presents a strategy for developing and revising the outcomes component of a program model that is based on the notion that a well-conceived outcomes measurement process is essential to providing program officials with hints about how to improve a program (Hatry, 1999). Using a family literacy program as a case example, a program model was constructed from basic features of a program

goal, two program objectives or outcomes, and multiple activities. Client exit data, consisting of rich illustrations of program achievements, were then used to create a more sophisticated program model that more explicitly identified the program's pathways to achieving intended outcomes. Client's perceptions of program services and outcomes are useful tools for fine-tuning program models and better understanding how client change is achieved.

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