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Evaluation in the Branco Weiss Institute: From Social Vision to Educational Practice

Ruthie Lustig, Shira Ben Baruch-Koskas, Tova Makhani-Belkin, Tami Hirsch

Abstract

This article presents the unique development of the evaluation unit at the Branco Weiss Institute (BWI) in Jerusalem, an educational nongovernmental organization designed to enhance individual and social growth and to reduce educational gaps in Israeli society. The Institute, which operates a network of schools for at-risk students along with comprehensive high schools, develops and implements educational and social programs in Israel's social and geographic periphery. The article describes the evaluation unit at the Institute as a democratic and culturally responsive mechanism that promotes social justice through the participation of all stakeholders in an ongoing dialogue that generates new knowledge for the organization and its programs. The article includes an illustration of the implementation of the model in a school program for pupils of Ethiopian origin. © 2015 Wiley Periodicals, Inc., and the American Evaluation Association.

The Third Sector in Israel

The third sector (nongovernmental organizations—NGOs) aims to advocate issues of public interest and concern in order to influence government policies. The third sector is community based, and more inclusive and client-focused compared to public welfare organizations or the private sector. This gives the sector a comparative advantage in approaching complex

social issues and in reaching marginalized or vulnerable groups (Arvidson, 2009).

In Israel, the third sector performs two primary roles: first, it operates as part of the welfare state system and is funded primarily by the state. Second, it maintains voluntary civil society organizations that provide a framework for individuals to join together in order to address community needs, pursue their collective interests, participate in building society, and foster social change. This aspect of collective life is a major building block of Israel's democratic life.

There are currently more than 34,000 registered third sector organizations in Israel. Most of these are nonprofit associations. The others are funding organizations and advocacy groups. A characteristic feature of the third sector in Israel is the partnership of funding organizations and government.

Israel's third sector emphasizes classic welfare services, with 84% of the sector's economic activity in health, education, and welfare. Public funding is the third sector's main revenue source (55%) (Katz, 2004). In the Hopkins Project's comparisons among 22 countries, Israel ranked fourth, following Holland, Ireland, and Belgium, in the relative size of its third sector within the larger economy.

Evaluation in the Third Sector

Evaluation is becoming increasingly important for governments and donors of the third sector as well as for the organizations themselves (Arvidson, 2009). Although funding agencies are placing increasing demands on organizations to provide evaluations of activities and achievements, they rarely provide resources for organizations to do so (Ellis & Gregory 2009). It is not clear that evaluations are actually used as a basis for decision-making and designing policy. As opposed to focusing on achievements and "results," evaluators in the third sector can promote the idea of outcomes that are not numerical, but rather speak to deeper levels of social change in the individual, school, and community (Reed, Jones, & Irvine, 2005). In addition, an evaluation framework can serve as an instrument for organizational learning. By defining a framework for evaluation, organizations can identify concepts that are essential to their work and suggest theoretical approaches as to how they are related (Sowa, Selden, & Sandfort, 2004).

In general, evaluation faces several challenges. On a managerial level, evaluation requires organizational skills and capacity: fears and expectations of staff have to be managed, and a culture of organizational learning has to be established. The organization should learn how to transform information gained through evaluation processes into organizational learning (Ellis & Gregory, 2009). On a methodological level, it is necessary to understand the possibilities and limitations of different evaluation methods, as well as the difficulties involved with interpreting data. In addition,

sometimes the information required by funding agencies does not match the information needs of the third sector organizations. Moreover, there is a tendency to focus on goals and consequently ignore significant unintended outcomes of a program. Another challenge is that when demanding information on outcomes, impacts, and efficiency, funding agencies pay little attention to organizational size and the scope and scale of the work.

The Branco Weiss Institute in the Context of Israeli Society

These challenges become especially prominent in the context of Israel's complex society. Since the establishment of the state, there have been significant demographic changes in Israeli society due to waves of Jewish immigration from different countries. Throughout the years, the socio-cultural–political discourse in Israel has changed from ideology of a society as "melting pot," to a unified Israeli collective identity leaning towards individualism and a multicultural identity. Accordingly, each of the major immigration waves experienced a different welcome, affecting its process of absorption, assimilation, and integration into Israeli society (Sheferman, 2008).

> In 1990, BWI was founded by Dr. Branco Weiss and Dr. Dan Sharon. Its establishment was designed to promote the Israeli education system. A decade ago, the Institute began working directly with youth, both through establishing and operating a network of comprehensive schools and schools for at-risk students and through the implementation of a variety of holistic educational programs within existing schools. The Institute focused its operation in the geographic and social periphery of Israel, with the aim of promoting social justice by closing social and educational gaps. (Branco Weiss Institute, n.d.)

The Institute's use of the concepts *promoting critical and reflexive thinking*, as well as *teaching for understanding*, underlie the assumption that thinking strategies and tools help learners (students and teachers alike) to reach a broader understanding of the world and develop the ability for critical and more flexible attitudes and perceptions. Another assumption is that for students from the periphery, these skills constitute a significant force for progress, integration into society, and the development of leadership capacities. Then they will contribute to social development and promotion of social justice in Israel. To materialize these goals, the Institute established an evaluation unit.

The Evaluation Unit

The internal evaluation unit has been part of the Branco Weiss Institute's (BWI's) organizational structure since 2006. Throughout the years, the evaluation unit's working concept has been formulated and shaped in

accordance with the organization's evaluative needs as well as its aspiration for organizational learning and improvement. The unit focuses on the usage of evaluation not only as a means of satisfying the stakeholders' need for valuable data, but also as a vehicle for change in the perceptions of the program's second order change circle. This is sometimes not considered as an explicit target of the program. Considering the multiple needs and audiences of an internal evaluation unit, the unit's key principle is an ongoing significant professional dialogue, building trust and partnership amongst the evaluation staff (methodology experts), educational staff (the subject matter experts), commissioners, and stakeholders. The unit's objective is to deliberately enlarge the circle of stakeholders to include society as a whole by using the evaluation research approach as a model to create awareness and social change on the part of the key players in the field.

The evaluation unit is guided in part by a number of principles drawn from conceptual theoretical approaches that reflect the evaluators' commitment to the society in which they operate:

- *Participatory evaluation*, which is based on a cooperative relationship between the evaluator and stakeholders (e.g., Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Weaver & Cousins, 2004).
- *Responsive evaluation*, which operates within the structural paradigm that conceives of the evaluator's role as an active one, promoting the ongoing dialogue process that includes a variety of perceived realities among stakeholders (Alkin & Christie, 2004). Stake argued that the evaluation "response" is based on three conceptual components (Friedman, 2005, p. 147):
  - *Flexibility*—stress on flexibility while performing the evaluation
  - *Freedom of action*—granting freedom to the researcher and research program to raise questions and modify the evaluation course
  - *Exposure*—full exposure and communication
- *Maintaining an ongoing dialogue between evaluator and stakeholders,* promoting evaluation use (Nevo, 2001). Relevant and useful information can be generated from the existence of constant organizational discourse between the evaluator and the stakeholders (Avgar, Berkowitz, & Shalv-Visgar, 2012).This position is based on the assumption that the evaluation is not a process carried out by the evaluator alone, but a joint endeavor of stakeholders and the evaluator.

This can be created while the different stakeholders are involved in the discourse that accompanies various levels of the research process. This discourse is the basis for creating a constructive partnership between the evaluator and the stakeholders throughout the evaluation process (Alpert, 2010; Nevo, 2001; Patton, 1997). The evaluation unit's unique position as an internal unit allows it to initiate and maintain constant dialog with many

of the stakeholders involved in the institute's programs: funding agencies, headquarters, and field staff. Throughout the evaluation process, there is constant dialogue and mutual learning involving the evaluation team and stakeholders. This dialogue takes place with all staff involved in the program, from headquarters to field level (Lustig & Ben Arie, 2013).

For example, every year, each program's findings are presented to the program's managers. In a joint reflection process, the findings are interpreted and form the basis for examining the macro achievements, challenges, and trends regarding the program's goals. The findings are in turn presented to funding agencies and to field staff at different occasions, allowing each setting to conduct important dialogues while gaining insights that can enhance decision making regarding the programs.

The partnership in the evaluation process produces a high level of commitment among the different stakeholders, broadens their perspective on the program and promotes the understanding of each party's contribution and responsibility to the program's achievements, both at the micro and the macro levels. In fact, the evaluation process becomes a significant tool for all stakeholders in maximizing the effectiveness of the programs and promoting its social-educational goals.

The evaluation process produces findings that range over various operating contexts and different periods. The attempt to generate broad ramifications from the findings, while maintaining their relevance, is a continuous process that requires ongoing dialogue between the various stakeholders involved (Ben Baruch-Kuskas, Lustig, & Biran-Zinger, 2013). Such ongoing dialogue plays a crucial role in building deep understanding.

A significant concept in this context is the *blind area* defined by Luft and Ingham (1955) in the Johari Window model as "Knowledge known to others but to not me" (Figure 8.1). Figure 8.1 illustrates the concept of different people being aware of different kinds of knowledge. It is cited here because these differences unconsciously cause different perceptions and understandings of the program and the program's context. Exposing these disparities generates knowledge leading to professional and personal improvement.

The unit's special position within the Institute allows it to have insightful perspectives about the programs operated by the Institute, as well as the various communication channels within the organization. This position enables continuous learning dialogue between the evaluation team, program managers, and field staff. While some of the information about the evaluated programs is relevant only to some of the stakeholders, there are elements to which awareness has a significant effect on the rest of the circles involved. As long as these elements are within the blind area of one of the circles, they are error-prone and their relevance is compromised. The evaluation process is an important facilitator in making covert knowledge into visible knowledge that is part of the shared *open area*. As an internal evaluation unit, the evaluation process is largely aimed toward making the findings accessible

Figure 8.1. Known and Unknown Knowledge Areas in the Johari Window

Other's Knowledge	*Known to Others*	Open	Blind
	Not Known to Others	Hidden	Unknown
		Known to Self	*Not Known to Self*
		Self-Knowledge	

to the different stakeholders, thereby reducing the blind area among them for continued improvement of the programs and realizing its potential.

Contributing to Second Order Change[1]

Most of BWI's programs are funded through partnership with different NGOs that share common values and goals with BWI. Those partners constitute central stakeholders in the progress and the challenges of the programs and in leveraging program achievements for larger scale impact. In addition, the programs work within the Israeli school system—with the collaboration of principals, teachers, and students, making the school system, and on a larger scale, the Ministry of Education, additional important stakeholders. Furthermore, the evaluation unit aims at enlarging the circle of stakeholders to include different key players in the field and society as a whole by using the evaluation research as a basis for creating awareness for social change.

As part of making the findings accessible and useful, many resources are invested in processing them in a user-friendly and relevant way to the different stakeholders. Efforts are made by all parties to adapt the evaluation tools and extend the use of the evaluation findings. For example, every year an effort is made to process the data from the educational programs before the beginning of the following school year, enabling the field staff who are working within schools to receive the findings of their specific school as well as the findings of the total program. The specific information, together

with the larger perspective, is then used for drawing conclusions and setting goals for the ensuing annual work plans. The processing and presentation of the findings are tailored to each program based on its needs and goals and are part of annual workshops for the field staff. Throughout, the interpretation process is conducted in collaboration with program managers and staff in joint discussions about the relevant meaning and uses of the findings.

An Example of the Model in Practice

The following example illustrates the evaluation process of one of the BWI programs, which follows up the Institute's program designed for students of Ethiopian origin who study in vocational high schools.

The Jewish Ethiopian immigration to Israel took place in two major waves: 17,000 in the 1980s and 45,000 in the 1990s. Ethiopian immigrants encountered difficulties upon arriving in Israel. A large proportion of the immigrants were uneducated; most of them were farmers, who had a minimum familiarity with educational facilities and modern employment. Ethiopian family structure differs from that of mainstream Israeli families: The number of children is higher, there are many single-parent families with three or more children, and there are many fathers aged over 65 with children under the age of 18. Finally, the absorption of the Ethiopian immigrants took place while Israeli society was facing social, economic, and political challenges: the arrival of a very large wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union, high unemployment rates, a widening social gap, and increased poverty. Over time, feelings of discrimination began to intensify among Ethiopian immigrants. After 20 years, many immigrants of Ethiopian origins have not yet integrated in the Israeli society (Sheferman, 2008).

The schools in this particular program focus on integrating students who dropped out of regular high schools into a learning setting that combines general and vocational studies. The program, funded by the Ethiopian National Project in Israel, operates within the school systems on both individual and systemic levels for helping the Ethiopian youth to graduate and achieve their full scholarly potential while strengthening their personal identity.

In this program, the majority of the work is on a personal–emotional level and focuses on personal–emotional goals, such as self-esteem, motivation, and learning habits. Crucial weight is given to individual work in the schools, both with the students and the teaching staff. One of the special evaluation tools created for the program is a questionnaire for the homeroom teacher of each participant. The questionnaire was designed to gain understanding of the homeroom teacher's perspective concerning the participants during each year and over the years, in comparison to the top functioning level within the class and school. The homeroom teachers complete the questionnaire at the beginning and at the end of each school year. They

Figure 8.2. Example of an Individual Diagram of a Participant in the Program, in Comparison With the Mean End-of-the-Year Scores of the Participants and Comparison Group

Dear Facilitator,

The following figures are intended to ease the use of the data and serve as a practical tool for your work plan and your direct work with the pupils.
The data is taken from the tables and present a diagram for each student's individual rank on all of the questioner items - at the beginning and end of the school year.
The lines represent the average rating of all the participants and the comparison group in the end of the year (so as not to overload the graph).

Good Luck,
The evaluation unit

Dan

| Expresses aspirations for the future | Motivation to invest in school | Bring required equipment for class | listening and concentrated in class | active learner in class | tend to getting involved in fights | parental involvement | expected level of future studies | academic achievements |

■ End of the year   ▨ Beginning of the year   ─ end year: overall participants   ─ end year: overall comparis om group

rank each participant on several measures relating to the goals of the program. This information allows monitoring and mapping the participants' needs and progress, and is an important source for identifying areas that require special investment on both individual and group levels. In addition, this instrument facilitates a productive dialogue between the program staff and the homeroom teachers. In addition, as a measure for comparison, the tutors fill out this questionnaire on four other non-Ethiopian-origin students with the highest achievements in the class.

To make the questionnaire a practical and relevant tool, the data are processed on a group level and on an individual basis, giving the program's facilitators an opportunity to review the teacher's perspective on each participant at the beginning and end of the year, compared with all participants in the program and all the pupils in the comparison group (Figure 8.2).

In addition, to enable each facilitator to acquire a broad picture of the program in the school and maximize the potential of his or her dialogue with the school staff, a presentation is prepared for each facilitator, with his or her school's data (Figure 8.3).

Getting the homeroom teachers' perspective on significant characteristics of the participants enables program facilitators to further reduce the blind area by opening a window to an arena in which they are not present. This information enables the creation of a partnership and focused dialogue

Figure 8.3. Example of Findings of the Mean Scores in the Beginning and End of the School Year Among Program Participants and the Comparison Group Regarding Learning Habits
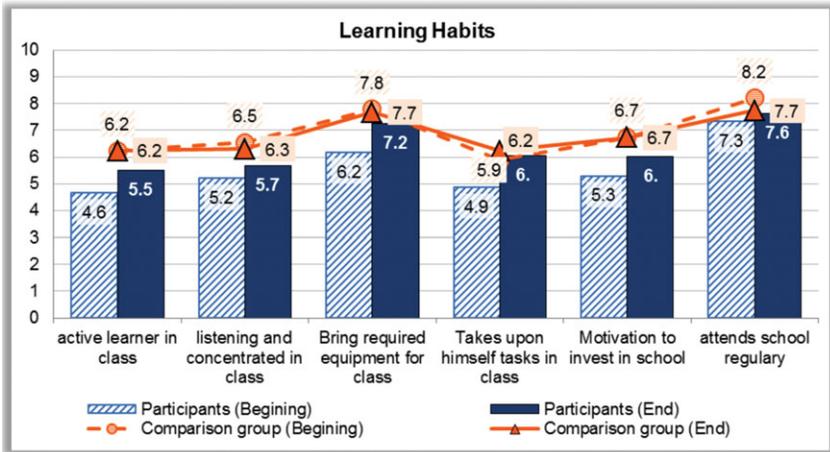
with the teachers regarding their understanding of the participants and the ways to help and promote their progress.

Choosing to process and present the data on an individual basis, in addition to the analysis on the school and overall level, is an investment. It is done to make the data useful—enabling production of shared knowledge that can be used as a practical and relevant work tool throughout the year. The findings become another tool for the facilitators to identify strengths and weaknesses in the school where they work and their individual work with each participant.

Conclusion

This article presents a model of how an internal evaluation unit can influence processes that lead to social change. The model strives to produce synergy among all the stakeholders, including program developers, funding agencies, program operators, participants, and policy makers through an ongoing discourse and learning process. On the one hand, the unit aims at enhancing the Institute as a learning organization. On the other hand, it conducts evaluations of the social and educational programs funded by external funding agencies. While the external funders opt for outcome evaluation, the unit aims at building knowledge and professional capacity. By using the tension created by this potentially problematic situation, the unit serves as a bridge between those agencies, the Institute and all the stakeholders providing a vehicle and an arena for learning and knowledge development. A spiral process is created that surpasses the borders of evaluation

and reaches beyond the program itself, narrowing educational and social gaps and disparities in Israeli society. As a result, the target populations are empowered and social justice is promoted.

Note

1. Second order change is creating a new way of seeing things broadly. It requires new learning and questions the organization existing structure (Fox, 1997; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974).

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RUTHIE LUSTIG is the head of the evaluation unit at the Branco Weiss Institute and a member of the executive committee of IAPE, the Israeli Association for Program Evaluation.

SHIRA BEN BARUCH-KOSKAS is a researcher in the evaluation unit at the Branco Weiss Institute and a family therapist.

TOVA MAKHANI-BELKIN is a researcher in the evaluation unit at the Branco Weiss Institute.

TAMI HIRSCH is a researcher in the evaluation unit at the Branco Weiss Institute.