ADAPTING THE VALUES ENGAGED, EDUCATIVE EVALUATION FRAMEWORK TO THE EVALUATION OF A COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAM

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Abstract

The values engaged, educative (VEE) evaluation framework (Greene, DeStefano, Burgon, & Hall, 2006) was originally conceived for, and implemented in, STEM educational contexts. Its emphasis on responsive engagement with the values of equity and social justice, makes it adaptive to other contexts. This article reports on the extent to which the VEE evaluation framework was culturally responsive when applied to an evaluation of a community-based healthy living program for older adults, a minoritized and underserved population. Findings suggest affordances of using VEE in the context of a healthy living program include engaging stakeholders in the evaluation and addressing content, pedagogy, and equity. The framework's key limitation includes lack of attention to organizational capacity. To facilitate its transferability beyond STEM settings to other context, the inclusion of a new element in the VEE evaluation framework, organizational capacity, is proposed.

Keywords: *Values Engaged Educative evaluation, culturally responsive evaluation, evaluation theory, organizational capacity.*

1. Introduction and theoretical framework

In this mixed methods evaluation study, I test the applicability of the values engaged, educative (VEE) evaluation approach (Greene, DeStefano, Burgon, & Hall, 2006) from STEM education to community-based, healthy living programs. I examine the framework's affordances and limitations to inform the proposed modification of including organizational capacity as part of VEE.

Figure 1. Engaging with the Intersection of Content, Pedagogy, and Equity.

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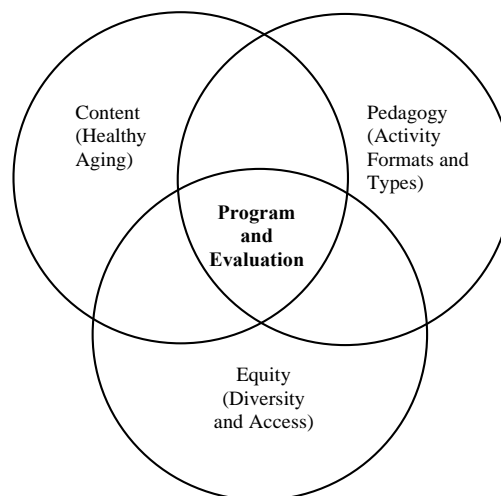
The healthy living program was a six-month program in an organization serving older adults in the Southeastern U.S. This program's purpose was to enhance older adults' quality of life. I conducted the evaluation from a value engaged, educative (VEE) evaluation approach (Greene et al., 2006). This

approach prescribes evaluative engagement with the values of equity and social justice, and includes a framework to engage with the intersection of content, pedagogy, and equity. In my approach as an evaluator, I prominently promoted values engagement by ensuring the perspectives and interests of all stakeholders were included, especially from participants who have been traditionally excluded from evaluation designs (Greene et al., 2006). Prior to conducting the evaluation of the program, I developed a Venn diagram (see Figure 1) to consider the roles that content, pedagogy, and diversity in the design of the program's evaluation. This diagram guided the evaluation design, data collection and analysis, interactions with the program's director, and served as a reminder for me to reflect on the program from perspectives that privileged the perspectives of the program participants.

2. Description of the program

The healthy living program was a six-month program that was effort to systematize the educational classes and activities offered by an active living center serving older adults in the Southeastern U.S.A. This program's purpose was to enhance older adults' quality of life by helping them maintain their health, stay active, remain connected to their communities, and reduce food waste through behavior change. The program was organized using a points system where participants got points for the activities they participated in. At the end of the program, the total points were used to recognize participants according to their participation level. Examples of activities were cooking demonstrations, various types of physical activity (e.g., chair yoga, walking), garden club, presentations on nutrition and sustainability, and volunteering (e.g., labeling items at the local food bank).

The program was led by a director, who coordinated the program's calendar with community partners. The program relied on volunteers, interns, and staff from community partners to facilitate activities and deliver content. Interns from different departments at the local university helped run the program by tracking participants' points and running occasional activities. Community partners periodically facilitated activities in the program, so that every month there was some activity scheduled by each. For instance, the local farmers' market provided presentations about food waste and seasonal foods; the local hospital provided health monitoring sessions and facilitated health prevention presentations; students in a local university conducted cooking demonstrations; and volunteers facilitated gardening activities at the center's garden. Although these were ongoing partnerships, the individuals that facilitated activities from the university and each community organization changed constantly, with activity leaders rarely repeating unless it was a structured series. This lack of consistency often resulted in volunteers having difficulties finding the program, being late, or simply skipping sessions.

3. Methods

With the goal of triangulating the findings from each instrument (Greene et al., 1989), the study included a combination of qualitative and quantitative instruments: a survey, participant observation, participation data, document analysis, photo elicitation focus groups, a picture sort activity, and an interview with the program director. The survey (n=25) was based on an instrument that the program had previously used and was designed so that it would be easy to answer to account for the cognitive decline that was starting to be experienced by some participants. Participation data (n=31) included the information about number of days and type of activities attended. The evaluation included three photo elicitation (Harper, 2002) focus groups (n=8), where participants engaged in an activity where they sorted photos from the program according to their activity preference and talked about what the program meant for them using the photos they selected. All focus group participants chose and captioned a picture that best represented the program from their point of view. The three focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The 90-minute semi-structured interview with the program director covered topics such as changes noticed in the clients, the program's contribution to clients' health, the most important aspects of the work with the clients, and what they would change if there were starting the program again. The evaluator was a constant presence in the program for its duration through a variety of activities, such as observing regular program activities, running occasional activities and helping with regular program tasks, and having occasional drop-in meetings with the director to plan activities and to reflect. The evaluator had access to a range of program documents, such as monthly calendars that included scheduled program activities and that the director created, activity handouts from facilitators, and socio-demographic data. Survey data was analyzed using descriptive analytics, interview and focus group data was analyzed using deductive analysis (Saldaña, 2015), and documents were analyzed using content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

The 31 program participants were mostly Black women (68%), experiencing impairments to participation, such as mobility, health, and/or cognitive impairments (74%), and extremely low to low-income levels (97%).

This paper answers the following two questions: (1) What are the affordances and limitation of the values engaged, educative framework (Greene et al., 2006) for the evaluation of a community-based healthy living program? (2) How does the values engaged, educative evaluation framework transfer from the evaluation of STEM education programs to the evaluation of community-based healthy living programs?

4. Findings: Affordances and limitations of the VEE evaluation framework

This paper examines the VEE evaluation framework's affordances and limitations based on its implementation to evaluate the healthy living program. Based on these findings, I propose a modification to the VEE evaluation framework to expand its applicability beyond STEM education programs.

4.1. Affordances of the VEE evaluation framework

The VEE evaluation framework provided a framework to engage stakeholders in the evaluation and to analyze how the program addressed content, pedagogy, and equity.

4.1.1. Engaging stakeholders in the evaluation. As part of the evaluation activities, the evaluator regularly met with the program's director to learn about the different elements of the program, to inform her of the evaluators' activities, and to get feedback on instruments, such as the survey. The evaluator regularly brought up the VEE evaluation Venn diagram to center the conversation. As stated in the program description section above, the original purpose of the program was to enhance older adults' quality of life by helping them maintain their health, stay active, remain connected to their communities, and reduce food waste through behavior change. The director was invested in keeping behavior change as the main purpose because she had seen dramatic changes happen with a few of the participants who had fewer mobility, health, and/or cognitive impairments. However, the evaluator was able to see, through participation in the program and conversations with stakeholders, that the program's reality was that the expectation of behavioral change was not feasible for a majority of participants. This was due to several factors, including: (1) the majority of participants experienced impairments to participation, which limited their involvement and their capacity to follow through program recommendations; (2) many participants lived in situations where they did not have control over their food and other living arrangements that would have allowed them to make the behavioral changes promoted in the program; (3) the programming was not structured to shepherd participants through the steps needed for behavior change; and (4) the lack of steady facilitators who were engaged in the program and had relationships with the participants further limited the potential impact of the program. Through engaging the director in the evaluation, and in spite of strong resistance from the director, the original purpose of the program was modified to be more realistic and focus on the goal of keeping participants active.

4.1.2. Addressing Content, Pedagogy, & Equity. Being attentive to the three intersecting elements in the VEE evaluation framework and their intersections was a significant focus for the conception and implementation of the evaluation. This served the purpose of assessing not only how participants were performing in the program, but mainly how the program performed for participants.

Content. The content of the sessions was determined by the program director and by the community partners. The program director cultivated the community partnerships and coordinated the program schedule, which was largely determined by the nature of the work that partners did. The participants voiced that they wanted fun, interesting content that was not repetitive and provided them with practical strategies they could use. The repetitive nature of the activities was particularly frustrating for some of the focus group participants and made them feel that they were not valued by the community partners who facilitated these activities. They also voiced their dissatisfaction with the fact that they were not consulted about the content of the activities in the program, as John (a 66-year-old Black man) and Alice (a 73-year-old White woman) explained:

> John: You got to have stuff that people are interested in, you know.
> Evaluator: So how can [the program] find out what you're interested in?
> John: Ask.
> Alice: Ask. But they don't do that. They never ask for input.

Pedagogy. The program included a broad variety of activity formats, including presentations, exercise and walking groups, hands-on activities, gardening, cooking demonstrations, games,

volunteering at the local food bank, and health checks, to name the most common. The focus groups showed that, although individuals had preferences for one type of activity over another, they also valued the diversity of formats offered, as Ursula (a 75-year-old Black woman with cognitive decline) and Beatrice (an 85-year-old Black woman) explained:

> *I look at it like this. If I'm busy, I feel better. I like staying busy. I like doing things. I like communicating. [...] But you know, I try to participate in a lot of different things. [...] I do have to say I like staying busy. I like volunteering. I like helping people, so that's about it. (Ursula)*

> *I go to anything. Any time I'm here, and they're having something, I go. I'll go and see what it's like. I enjoy all of them. (Beatrice)*

Participants also explained that not everyone was able to attend all activities due to impairments that limited their participation. For example, several participants could not attend the walking group or the gardening sessions because they had mobility limitations. Participants' complaints were mainly related to the repetitiveness of the content, the lack of steady facilitators, and not being consulted in determining the content of the program, not the format of the activities.

Equity. The director was aware of the differences among the program participants in terms of presence or absence of impairments to participation and spent a considerable amount of time and effort trying to schedule sessions in ways that would ensure balance, access, and meaningfulness. Some of the variables that she had to keep in mind were: (a) the activities themselves (avoiding repetition of content, interest in the topic, variety of formats); (b) the facilitators (their availability and popularity); (c) scheduling (scheduling popular activities on days of high attendance, avoiding double-scheduling); and (d) preexisting commitments with community partners. In spite of the director's efforts, the lack of control over staffing meant reduced organizational capacity, which in turn limited the program's responsiveness to its participants. Participants were keenly aware of how the limitations of the program's organizational capacity translated into its everyday realities. The evaluator's field notes from a peer group session noted:

> *We looked over the September calendar. ... They point out that they're going to be doing sprouting <u>again</u>. They did it last month. They said that there's nothing exciting on the calendar for September. ... They complained about: people offering the classes not staying with the dates; people simply not showing up – 'they just need to do it and stick to what they say;' some activities start late because presenters come late, and then they have to rush through because of lunch. ... There are all these things programmed, but then they don't happen.*

4.2. Limitations of the VEE evaluation framework

Using the VEE evaluation framework helped the evaluator identify that the program had difficulties that went beyond the three elements (content, pedagogy, equity) and were related to who implemented the program and how, exposing the need to consider organizational capacity as part of the evaluation. The evaluator did bibliographical research to find a helpful definition of organizational capacity for the program. Hall et al. (2003) stated that "the overall capacity of a nonprofit and voluntary organization to produce the outputs and outcomes it desires is a function of its ability to draw on or deploy a variety of types of organizational capital" (p. 4). The main elements in Hall et al.'s definition of organizational capital included human resources capacity, financial capacity, infrastructure and process capacity, planning and development capacity, and relationship and network capacity.

As we saw earlier, the program did not have human resources capacity since it heavily relied on interns for running the everyday program activities and volunteers from community partnerships for the facilitation of sessions. The educational and professional experience background of volunteers was often unknown, and interns, by definition, were in training. In addition, few interns and volunteers developed a relationship with the program and its participants, pointing out reduced relationship capacity. The program also relied on interns and volunteers because they were free, not requiring financial capacity. The combination of these problems made the evaluator conclude that the VEE evaluation framework needed to be modified to include organizational capacity for it to be applicable beyond STEM and in community-based programs such as this.

5. Discussion and conclusions: Modifying the VEE evaluation framework

The program evaluator proposes modifying the VEE evaluation framework to make it transferable beyond STEM education programs by adding organizational capacity as defined by Hall et al. (2003) as part of it. As we have seen, this definition refers to the overall capacity of an organization to accomplish its purposes through the deployment of human resources, finances, infrastructure and processes, relationships and networks, and planning and development. This new element in the VEE evaluation framework would not be an intersecting circle; it would underlie and encircle the framework

indicating its fundamental role for an organization to adequately address content, pedagogy, and equity at the program level. It would also guide the evaluator's eye towards understanding how organizational capacity sustains the intersection of the three elements at the evaluation level.

Figure 2. Proposed Modification of the VEE Evaluation Framework.
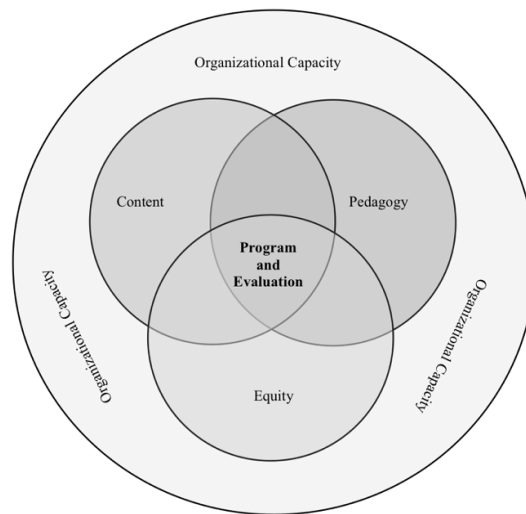
Like in Green et al.'s (2006) original definition of VEE, the application of the modified VEE evaluation framework does not prescribe the use of particular methods or the asking of particular questions. As such, the evaluator may use the modified framework according to the needs of each evaluation project. For example, if early information about the program indicates that organizational capacity may be an issue for the program, the evaluator may want to ask evaluation questions and have instruments that address it. In other cases, the evaluator may use the framework as general guidance for the evaluation, without having specific questions or instruments geared toward this area. In the case of the current study, it would have been useful to include an evaluation question and interview questions for both participants and program director to identify the areas where an improvement of organizational capacity would have been the most beneficial.

The modification of the VEE evaluation framework contributes a framework that is more culturally responsive and more adaptable to different typologies of programs beyond STEM education programs by bringing awareness to the need for organizational capacity to utilize resources to accomplish program purposes. Future research may consider applying this modified VEE framework in the evaluation of other community-based programs to see to what extent it is more culturally responsive and promotes evaluative capacity and evaluation utilization.

Acknowledgments

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