



# INSTITUTIONALISING THE USE OF EVALUATIONS TO INFORM POLICY AND PRACTICE: THE DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION, SOUTH AFRICA

## NEDSON POPHIWA

National Consumer Commission. Formerly head of research and knowledge management at CLEAR-AA and the researcher on the case

## CAROL NUGA DELIWE

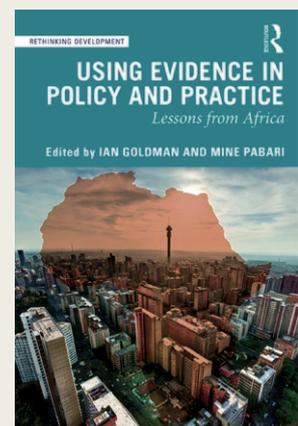
Department of Basic Education

## JABULANI MATHE

Consultant, formerly DPME evaluation director dealing with DBE

## STEPHEN TAYLOR

Department of Basic Education



## SUMMARY & KEY MESSAGES

South Africa's education sector has struggled to overcome the legacy of Apartheid and create an effective educational system. Schooling is the responsibility of the Department of Basic Education (DBE), which has been a pioneer of the use of evaluations, research and data in government. The case focuses on the experience of DBE in using evaluations, focusing on two in particular: the evaluation of the Funza Lushaka Bursary Programme and the evaluation of the National School Nutrition Programme. Instrumental, conceptual and process uses of the evaluations can be seen, brought about through a range of use interventions. Some of the interventions to promote use were required by the national evaluation system. Additional interventions were facilitated by DBE. The cases provide examples of evidence-informed policy and practice and illustrate how a government department can undertake and use evaluations effectively.

Key messages that emerge are that it is important to have an internal knowledge broker who champions and supports evidence generation and use, and the usefulness of a national evaluation system which provides key elements that encourage use.

## Background

Most people have had experience of the education system and have strong views on the system's deficiencies, and how to improve it. Tackling problems requires juggling popular ideas with scientific and evidence-informed approaches. The DBE has been a pioneer in using evidence for policy and decision making and has been a key stakeholder in the establishment of South Africa's national evaluation system (NES).

This policy brief examines two mini-cases of the use of evaluations by the DBE, namely the evaluation of the Funza Lushaka Bursary Programme (FLBP), a bursary programme for teachers, and the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). These were selected for the research based on the importance of the programmes and the DBE's intention to use the products and outcomes of the evaluations in strengthening policy support and implementation. This policy brief sets out to explain the contextual, institutional and cultural enablers and barriers to use of evidence in the education policy space.

This policy brief is one of a series of policy briefs that draw on case study research that took place in different areas of Africa from November 2018 to June 2019. The research examined the processes supporting or inhibiting evidence use in different African contexts and development sectors<sup>1</sup>. It used a behaviour change

framework to analyse the context, the interventions applied that encouraged evidence use, how these led to changes in capability, motivation and opportunity to use evidence, and finally evidence use. The framework and the findings which emerged from the research have been shared through a policy brief in this series, videos and a published book: 'Using Evidence for Policy and Practice – Lessons from Africa', edited by Ian Goldman and Mine Pabari, which has 39 contributing authors<sup>2</sup>.

## The development of structures to use evidence in DBE post 1994

One of the first tasks of the new educational planning system which was put in place after 1994 was to understand the size and shape of the education system, given that the many different systems from the Apartheid era had now been merged into one. The first forays into evidence use were drawn from the first Schools Register of Needs, commissioned in 1996 to provide planning information on the distribution of resources and the extent of the backlogs that the new government had to deal with. An education management information system was created in 2001 to collect information on school-level resourcing, complementing information in the personnel administration system. This was followed by establishment of a small Policy Support Unit (PSU) to support system-wide planning, monitoring and evaluation and track medium- to long-range performance. The DBE has a long tradition of using statistical evidence drawn from administrative data, official statistics on the population, and special surveys.

In its first decade, the PSU focused on generating policy-relevant analyses and trends using in-house data and specially commissioned surveys. By 2010, the PSU had been clustered with the unit responsible for short- to medium-term planning and monitoring, and renamed the Research Coordination, Monitoring and Evaluation (RCME) Unit in the Strategic Planning, Research and Coordination Chief Directorate (CD:SPRC), with the former policy support director as head of the Chief Directorate. The new unit retained the functions of the Policy Support Unit, and was now also responsible for intergovernmental coordination, strategic planning, research coordination, monitoring and evaluation. Its briefings, reports and analyses on policy-relevant trends were adopted in policy circles. Presentations by the director-general and senior managers to oversight bodies and stakeholders increasingly included reference to data and trends, rather than a recital of expenditure patterns, programme delivery and monitoring visits. Resolutions at ruling party conferences also began to refer to this information.

<sup>1</sup> Case study research took place in five countries (Benin, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and Uganda) plus the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS.

<sup>2</sup> The policy briefs on each case can be found at <https://www.wits.ac.za/clear-aa/supporting-evidence-use-in-policy-and-practice/> and the chapters at <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/using-evidence-policy-practice-ian-goldman-mine-pabari/e/10.4324/9781003007043>

Government-wide changes in approaches to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) were critical in supporting DBE's momentum. In 2010, a national Department of Performance (later Planning), Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) was created as the M&E champion in government. A national evaluation policy framework was approved by Cabinet in November 2011, with experts from DBE as co-authors (Davids et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2014). In its efforts to build a coalition to support the evaluation system, DPME established a cross-government Evaluation Technical Working Group (ETWG) 'as a sounding board and an advocate of the system' (Goldman et al., 2015, p.3). DBE was among the early adopters and members of this ETWG as they had already undertaken evaluations. Meanwhile DBE identified a number of large programmes for evaluation, ranging from early childhood development programmes to nutrition, initial teacher education bursaries and the best ways of teaching reading. These evaluations were all undertaken in partnership with DPME and were part of National Evaluation Plans.

## The two evaluations

### THE EVALUATION OF THE FUNZA LUSHAKA BURSARY PROGRAMME

The Funza Lushaka Bursary Programme (FLBP) was established in 2007 and provides full-cost bursaries to high-achieving students who wish to undertake initial teacher education (ITE) programmes to become teachers in priority subjects such as maths, physical science and accounting, for foundation phase teaching, and for priority locations such as rural areas. It is a large-scale programme that reached 23 392 students during the period under evaluation (2007-2012), on average 15% of the total ITE enrolment over the period (DPME/DBE, 2016a).

The evaluation found that the FLBP was performing well, and was broadly effective (and cost-effective) in attracting high-achieving students who complete ITE programmes in good time and take up government-paid positions in public schools (DPME/DBE, 2016). However, the evaluation identified inefficiencies at different levels of government in implementation with regard to supply and placement of educators. The evaluation resulted in a final report, management response, and an improvement plan to address the findings. These were approved by Cabinet in March 2017.

The managers of the project and stakeholders cited several examples that show how the findings and recommendations were used. A key area was rethinking the selection criteria to target specific areas of teacher specialisation. The evaluation recommended that DBE, with universities, should develop an effective system to monitor the priority areas that students have enrolled for and that subject areas should be fixed between application and selection (DPME/DBE, 2016). Since

then, they have produced a set of guidelines and criteria for selection of students based on geographic and subject area and phases required by the FLBP policy and become stricter as to who is selected as a beneficiary (instrumental use). Secondly, the process of undertaking the evaluation was very important in itself (process use) and led to considerable learning. For example, the theory of change workshop brought together officials from higher education institutions, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, civil society groups, and provincial and national department officials to gain an understanding of key components of the bursary programme (conceptual use). Lastly, there are examples of *unintended use*. Parliament became more interested in understanding how FLBP graduates are placed in specific targeted areas rather than the logistical, administrative data concerning how placement was managed.

### THE EVALUATION OF THE NATIONAL SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMME

The National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) aims to improve the health and nutritional status of the poorest learners. The main purpose of the evaluation was to assess whether the NSNP is being implemented in a way that is likely to result in significant health and educational benefits to primary school learners and establish how to improve programme effectiveness. The evaluation report was approved in October 2016. An improvement plan was developed and the report and improvement plan were presented to Cabinet. The NSNP evaluation provided the DBE with a robust understanding of the successes in implementation, the barriers to implementation and inefficiencies in the programme, and an overview of perceptions, concerns and achievements in its implementation. This information strengthened policy makers' hands in putting forward a plan of action for the NSNP, long after the improvement planning and reporting process had expired.

The project managers and stakeholders cited several examples which illustrate how the NSNP evaluation findings and recommendations were used. The findings were used *instrumentally* in that they directly effected changes to the roll-out of the NSNP. Firstly, the recommendations included introducing individual targeting in certain provinces/schools in which not all learners eat the NSNP meals regularly, and where income and poverty levels are mixed. Several task teams were set up to determine the targeting criteria to be used in addressing learner opt-outs, of which one of them recommended that there should be set criteria for targeting meals provision according to learner needs as long as it is affordable (instrumental use). Secondly, a recommendation was that the NSNP guidelines should specify who the meals are intended for, how leftover meals and stock should be dealt with, with monitoring of implementation. DBE committed to revising its guidelines on meals and developing stock control and plans to manage leftovers to avoid food waste. The DBE evaluated the quality of soya mince and developed a list of

compliant manufacturers, which was then circulated to Provincial Education Departments at the end of 2017 to guide procurement decisions (instrumental use). We see conceptual use in that the evaluation process deepened stakeholders’ understanding of NSNP activities, opportunities for better implementation, and utility (DPME, 2017). In one of the planning workshops that shaped the focus of this chapter, one comment that stood out was that DBE is one of the few departments which have ‘institutionalised the use of evidence’ generated from research and evaluations.

## The interventions that helped to promote use and how this stimulated change

Table 1 summarises the interventions undertaken to promote the use of evidence. The South African national evaluation system requires certain of these activities but DBE added additional interventions.

**Table 1: Use interventions and how these influenced use**

Intervention	Effect and change mechanism activated
<b>DBE systems</b>	
Knowledge brokering role of Strategic Planning, Research and Coordination Chief Directorate (CD:SPRC)	The CD:SPRC ‘marketed’ itself to programme managers to persuade them that evaluations improve implementation, and encourage them to identify possible topics.  By working with programme managers, CD:SPRC helped to build <i>awareness</i> in the Department of the evaluations and their findings, <i>trust</i> in the credibility of the findings, and to ensure the <i>institutionalisation</i> <sup>1</sup> of mechanisms to respond to the evaluation.  The CD:SPRC made use of its internal communication channels to inform the minister and management of the findings and recommendations.
CD:SPRC playing a strong role in the evaluations	By having technically strong people, DBE was able to play a strong role in the technical side of the evaluation, which increased the credibility and legitimacy of it within DBE, and so <i>trust</i> in the findings.
Presenting and showcasing evaluation findings in different forums	The evaluations were presented at the Council of Education Ministers, at the meeting of technical heads of education departments in provinces with national government (HeadComm), and at the various interprovincial subcommittees focusing on different topics, such as teacher development; curriculum; planning and M&E. This helped to build <i>trust</i> in the evaluation results.
<b>Elements of the NES</b>	
Technical Working Group (TWG) and Evaluation Steering Committee (ESC)	Having a TWG and ESC enabled co-development of all stages of the evaluation from formulation to finalisation. This facilitated <i>agreement</i> , <i>ownership</i> and <i>trust</i> between DPME and DBE and conviction in the usefulness of evaluation results.
Developing theory of change with stakeholders	Helped to build common <i>understanding</i> of how the programme worked, valuable in itself, and the act of working on the theory of change with stakeholders stimulated their interest in being part of the process, and their understanding.
Validation workshop with stakeholders	This made stakeholders <i>aware</i> of the findings and then recommendations were developed in an <i>interactive</i> manner with them. This allowed stakeholders an opportunity to reflect on the recommendations and thereby <i>agree to</i> and <i>own</i> them, and <i>trust</i> the results.
Summary report	Improved <i>accessibility</i> and helped with advocacy and dissemination of findings.
Management response	The management response is a <i>formal</i> mechanism whereby different departments have to acknowledge the recommendations and indicate those they <i>agree/disagree</i> with and why. It provides a way of <i>institutionalising</i> the recommendations.
Improvement plan	An improvement plan is another <i>formal</i> mechanism for agreeing how to take forward and <i>institutionalise</i> recommendations . An improvement plan was developed and implemented for each evaluation.
Quality assessment	Both evaluations were formally quality assessed for the DPME to ensure credibility and <i>trust</i> in evaluation findings.
Report public on DPME website	Once the reports were approved by Cabinet, they were made available to the wider public on DBE and DPME’s websites. This helped in giving stakeholders <i>access</i> to the information, and in so doing, promoted <i>awareness</i> of the results.
Approval by Cabinet	The requirement that evaluations must be taken through a Cabinet process was effective in getting people to take the evaluation results seriously and in generating momentum for follow-up actions. It also promoted <i>agreement</i> by Cabinet and <i>ownership</i> of the results.
Role of DPME evaluation director	Provided technical assistance, guidance and logistical support for the processes involved in evaluations, and a bridge to reporting to Cabinet.

*The words in italics in the table are what we describe in the framework as the change mechanisms which lead to changes in capability, motivation and opportunities to use evidence, i.e. they influence the behaviour.*

Overall we can see that the CD:SPRC played a key role in *championing* the use of evaluations, and *knowledge brokering* with programme managers, senior management of DBE, DPME and the evaluation service provider. In general, the work produced by the research and evaluation directorate has been taken more seriously over the years. There is a recognisable shift in attitude of senior management, which indicates the importance of the evidence they are generating and using.

## Policy implications and recommendations

In DBE's evaluations since 2013, most of the evaluation recommendations have focused on promoting operational efficiency, rather than suggesting the need for additional resources. And, in general, far from being compliance exercises, the recommendations have been acted on for operational improvement and policy review.

Some of the lessons for policy and recommendations that emerge are:

- Having the same *leadership* for a relatively long period of time provides stability, which allows time for evidence to be generated and used to drive change. The Minister of DBE has been in post since 2009, and many key staff, such as the head of the CD:SPRC, have also been in post for long periods.
- *Crises* can provide an opportunity for use of evidence – and preparing an evidence base can enable a quick response with evidence when need arises. A textbook supply crisis prompted frank assessment of weaknesses, and the desire to see where improvements can be made.
- Continuing *political will* to support independent evaluation, information and data is critical.
- In DBE, CD:SPRC worked hard to shift approaches towards appreciation of evidence, and to act as knowledge brokers linking evidence generation and use by policy makers and programme managers. This illustrates the important role played by an internal unit (CD:SPRC) as *evidence champions* and *knowledge brokers*.
- Evidence was sometimes viewed negatively by programme managers and *advocacy* is required. The role of an internal champion is key in addressing this, and encouraging a learning rather than a punitive approach.
- The existence of a *national evaluation system which focuses on use* with a national champion, leading and driving evaluations and offering technical advice, provides considerable additional support in encouraging systems which promote the use of evidence.
- The case studies show the importance of an approach that supports *involvement of stakeholders* throughout the process, so that they own both the product and the process. For example, in these

case study examples, stakeholders were involved in developing the theory of change, and the recommendations were developed in an iterative manner in a broader stakeholder validation workshop.

- The importance of the perceived *legitimacy of the messengers*. In one evaluation, the choice of service provider was considered problematic in that a renowned critic of government programmes was appointed in the competitive bidding process. This person then pronounced quite negatively on the study in the first drafts, without the necessary evidence to back up some pronouncements, possibly compromising the legitimacy of the results and findings of the study. The DBE then insisted that, using standard research practice, evidence from the study should be shown for every conclusion or recommendation made before inclusion in the final official evaluation report.

Overall, the mini-cases in this study demonstrate considerable levels of use which can be attributed to the factors mentioned above. The study demonstrates how a government department can undertake and use evaluations effectively, and the importance of an internal knowledge broker to champion and support this, as well as the usefulness of a national evaluation system in providing key elements that encourage use.

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## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This brief draws on case study research carried out for the project, 'Evidence in practice: documenting and sharing lessons of evidence-informed policy making and implementation in Africa', supported by the Hewlett Foundation. The case study research was guided by an analytical framework that combines two different frameworks: i) the Science of Using Science's framework that looks at evidence interventions and outcomes from a behaviour change perspective (Langer et al., 2016) and the Context Matters framework that serves as a tool to better

understand contextual factors affecting the use of evidence (Weyrauch et al., 2016). The framework approaches evidence use from a policy maker's perspective (i.e. from a demand rather than supply perspective). The framework takes into account contextual influencers and breaks down an evidence journey into the ways in which evidence is generated, the interventions taken in order to ensure evidence use, the change mechanisms that arise as a result and the relationships between the evidence journey and the immediate and wider outcomes that emerge.

