

Hands-on

Learning from our implementing partners

Monitoring and Evaluation

Working Rigorously With Stories: Introducing the Impact Story Tool

By Benita Williams and Taonga Chilalika

Stories told by programme beneficiaries can be useful when evaluating the effectiveness/impact of programmes. Anecdotes allow beneficiaries to confirm that a specific activity took place and to explain in their own words how they experienced it and what it meant to them. Stories are, however, subjective in nature and may be influenced in many ways by the perceptions of the beneficiaries. For example, some beneficiaries might believe that they have to provide a positive account of what happened or else they might lose the benefits of the programme entirely (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004)¹.

Stories, on their own, are therefore seldom regarded as sufficient evidence that a programme/intervention is effective and generally need to be verified or supported by more objective information². However, when an intervention or programme has many and different impacts for different beneficiaries, stories are the only real source of information that can give a sense of the scope of effects that the intervention may have contributed to.

Researchers have found numerous ways of addressing the concerns about the credibility of stories as an information source on the effectiveness of programmes. In this learning brief we discuss the 'Impact Story Template' as a tool to working more rigorously with stories in order to promote their usefulness in understanding the impact of programmes/interventions.

The Impact Story Tool

The Impact Story Tool is a one page form that captures the details of a specific kind of story – A story about a change that occurred after a specific intervention was implemented. It can be used as one of various data collection methods to inform efforts to determine the effectiveness of a programme/intervention.

The process starts when participants are invited to share stories of changes during a face-to-face interaction (an interview or meeting) and are then asked to provide more detail by completing the Impact Story Form. In this way participants are free to share the striking aspects of a story during a first telling, and are then encouraged to think more critically about the story when they are asked to recount its different aspects (see an example of the form at the end of this article):

1. Unpacking the change

The beneficiary is asked to describe the key points of the change-story by explaining what changed, who was affected by the change, and why this change can be seen to be beneficial. The participant is also asked to relate how the intervention contributed towards the change.

2. Categorising the change

Next the form asks beneficiaries to label the change using categories that may have been identified when the programme/intervention was planned. This allows the participant to decide whether the story is representative of any of the

¹ Henning, E.; Van Rensburg, W. & Smit, B. 2004. *Finding your way in qualitative research*.

² Empirical information collected through a scientific method.



expected changes, or if it is an unexpected change. This question can also be asked prior to the telling of the story to inform the beneficiary of the factors that may be necessary to be included or addressed in some detail when sharing the story.

3. *Attributing the change*

Beneficiaries are invited to indicate whether the intervention was partly, wholly or not at all responsible for the change that they reported. If the intervention/programme is implementing various activities, the beneficiary is asked to identify which activity contributed towards the change.

In order to provide the organisation or researcher an opportunity to verify that the participant's account of a change story is accurate, the participant is asked to provide their own contact details, and those of another person that may be able to verify the story. All the stories, or a sample of them, might be verified before the information is analysed.

The stories can be included in reports as anecdotes or quotes, but some analysis, critically considering the trends emerging from all the stories together, will contribute to inferences about the effectiveness of the intervention/programme/activity. Such analysis can be qualitative where the emerging themes are categorised and studied to provide answers to the more descriptive 'how' and 'why' questions. A scoring guide³ can also be used to analyse the story quantitatively (in terms of numbers), which will be useful in answering questions of whether the change has happened and to what extent it has happened (impact).

The scoring guide distinguishes between verified and unverified stories and may classify an impact/change as low level, medium level, or high level depending on the number of people that were affected, whether the impact was direct or weak, or whether the impact was a change in an individual's SKVAs (Skills, Knowledge, Values, Attitudes), an individual's behaviour or whether it changed an

organisational pattern. The analysis of impact/change can then be studied in relation to the intervention/project activities and the answers to the questions about attribution. Analysed in this way the stories can paint a useful picture of which changes the intervention contributed to.

Case Study

The South African Extraordinary Schools Coalition (SAESC) is a Community of Practice⁴ which is made up of school leaders from a group of schools around South Africa that define themselves as "impact schools". Impact schools are described as "high-quality, achievement-orientated schools that provide disadvantaged learners across South Africa with affordable access to high-quality learning that prepares them for success in higher education and the world of work. SAESC member schools are spread across five provinces, but they serve the same type of learner in their different contexts, namely children who are disadvantaged by poverty". The SAESC is self-regulating and self-organising. When it was first formed in 2010, this community of practice defined its own set of themes and objectives, which have guided its activities over its first years. The members of the coalition are engaged in sharing best practice, attending content-based workshops at each other's schools, and taking part in assessment and monitoring and evaluation as and when necessary. In an evaluation of the Coalition this was one of the stories shared:

"Peer Review – the participation in this has been probably one of the single most valuable things that has happened to us through [the coalition]. Having staff members being part of a team has brought a richness to them and their approach within our school, and the preparation and receiving of a review has been a gift to our school and staff. It has already resulted in a more collective leadership approach and caused staff to reflect deeply on their teaching practice, their classrooms and their engagement with students. The privilege of being involved in the development of the instrument and going to the US to create it was an amazing opportunity – not only the development of the instrument but the engagement with other coalition members and the journey travelled together there and my own personal growth. I have learnt so much more about myself – been encouraged to be bolder with difficult conversations and practice more constructive self-reflection."

³ Also called an Evaluation Rubric.

⁴ Driven by local education development NGO, Bridge (www.bridge.org.za).



The scoring guide/rubric that was used to rate/assign quantitative values to the qualitative information documented in stories such as the one quoted above comprised the following:

Impact: 1-5 Individuals, 6 – 30 Individuals, 31 – 100 individuals; Organisational; System Wide

Impact on Learners: Significant; Tenuous; Not Applicable

Impact on Teachers: Significant; Tenuous; Not Applicable

Change: Value; Attitude; Skill; Knowledge, Individual Behaviour, Organisational Behaviour

Verified: Yes / Partly / No / Not Yet

collectively perceived by participants to be most influential in 'fostering the adoption of new working practices by participating individuals, schools and organisations (organisational impact). The quoted story speaks of a 'significant' impact on teachers effecting change in their 'attitude' and 'knowledge' and 'organisational behaviour'. As a group the participants believed that this impact would not have occurred had the Coalition not been involved. Another significant area of influence is 'support to implement principles of excellent practice' with fifteen examples – also directly attributed to the Coalition. The Coalition is however not yet perceived to be 'influencing broad policy change'.

By scoring stories in this way and analysing it in relation to the other categorised information documented in the Impact Story Tool, it was possible to recognise that the Coalition is

Stories collected through the Impact Story Tool also showed that "Peer Reviews" - doing a review as well as being reviewed - contributed the most

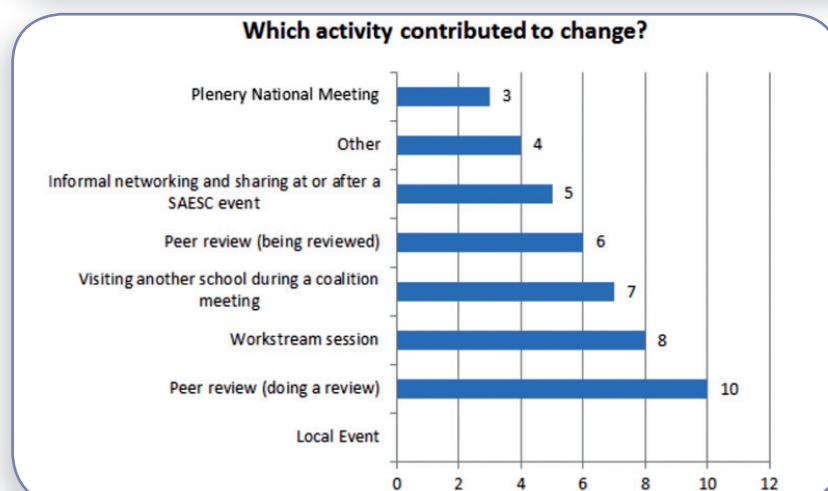
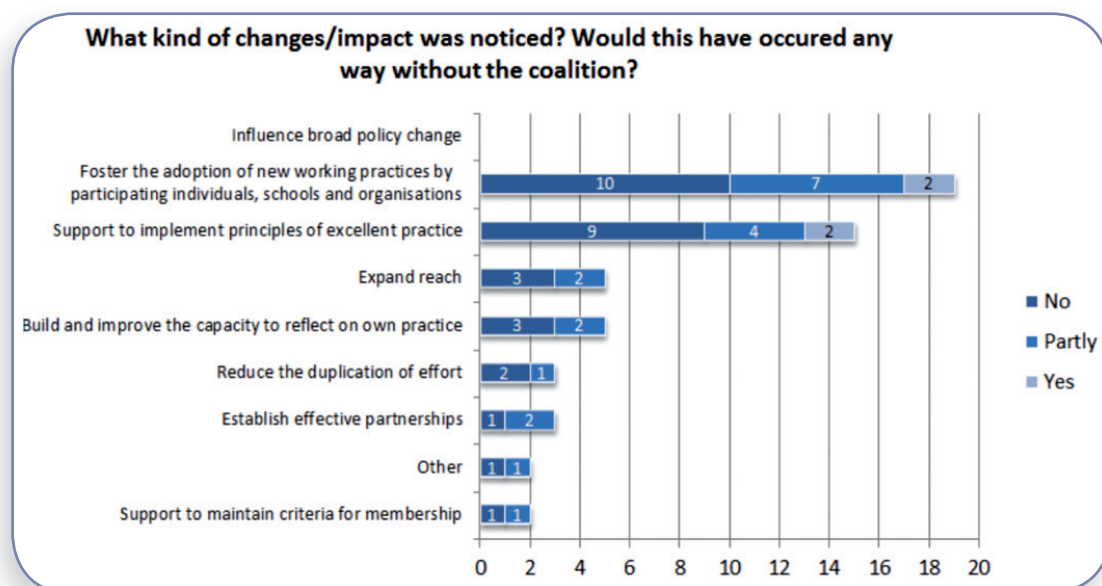


Figure 1: (Above) Number of stories reporting change in various categories as a result of the school coalition

Figure 2: (Left) Activities attributing to change



towards change (16 stories attributed change to this activity). Based on these findings it was possible to recommend that the Coalition seeks to increase the number of peer reviews conducted and the number of persons who participate in the reviews.

The benefits and drawbacks

The Impact Story Tool introduces a more rigorous way of working with stories, whilst not being as resource intensive as the group processes required with other techniques. The Impact Story Tool encourages participants to articulate aspects of a story that could be potentially useful to determine the effectiveness of the programme/intervention and thus ensures that beneficiaries' voices are heard in this regard. It also offers various analysis possibilities and contributes towards standardisation across different beneficiary accounts. It starts to address the attribution question, and by verifying the stories, some more credibility can be attached to the evidence. It is possible that with this tool many differing accounts of changes can be captured and when there is some comparability, it allows for the possibility of many anecdotes together providing an evidence base that cannot be as easily dismissed as single anecdotes.

Although the Impact Story Tool makes it possible to verify that changes actually occurred, it doesn't address all problems typically associated with anecdotes. For example: A beneficiary may be incorrectly attributing a change to an intervention or may remain unwilling to share examples of negative impacts. The actual benefit that may have transpired from a change can also not easily be quantified using only this tool. It is important, therefore, to employ the Impact Story Tool in a thoughtful manner together with other sources of data.

Conclusion

Working with stories in evaluation allows us to get a firsthand account of evidence that can be used to establish the impact that an intervention has had, as the stories give us the opportunity to engage directly with beneficiaries. Although stories cannot be used on their own to speak to the effectiveness of programmes/interventions, it is a rich source of information especially if it is collected and analysed systematically. An effective means of ensuring standardisation in the information collection process is by using a story template. Rigour in the analysis process can be enhanced with the use of a scoring guide/evaluation rubric.

About the authors:

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Impact Story Template used for the School Coalition Evaluation

Use a separate page for each story

During the coalition meeting, you shared an example of how the Coalition contributed towards an impact in your organization. Please fill in this story template with as much detail as possible and hand it back to any of the XXX staff, or email it to XXX. By completing this story template, you help us to record the information in a format that will be useful for evaluating the Coalition. Your comments may be anonymously quoted in an evaluation report.

Question 1: Which of the following categories, best describe the kind of impact you noticed? (Mark all that apply with an x to the left of the relevant description)

☐	Build and improve the capacity to reflect on own practice	☐	Foster the adoption of new working practices by participating individuals and schools
☐	Support schools to implement principles of excellent practice	☐	Support Coalition schools to maintain criteria for membership
☐	Reduce the duplication of effort	☐	Influence broad policy change
☐	Establish effective partnerships	☐	Other:
☐	Expand reach		

Question 2: Please narrate the key points of your example here again (Pay attention to WHAT the impact was, WHO was impacted, WHY this is an improvement (SO WHAT?) and how the Coalition CONTRIBUTED to it)

WHAT?	
WHO?	
SO WHAT?	
COALITION'S CONTRIBUTION	

Question 3: Do you think that this impact would have occurred in any way if there was no Coalition? (Mark the relevant choice with an x)

3.1 ☐ Yes ☐ Partly ☐ No

3.2 What specific activity / aspect of the Coalition contributed to the impact being realised (mark the relevant choice(s) with an x)

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Plenary at National Meeting | ☐ Work Stream Session |
| ☐ Peer Review (Being reviewed) | ☐ Peer Review (Doing a review) |
| ☐ Informal networking and sharing at or after an SAESC event | ☐ visiting another school |
| ☐ Other (Specify) | |

Question 4: In order to verify the information, we may need to contact you at a later stage.

Please provide the particulars below:

Your Name & Surname:		Email:	
Your Organization:		Cell phone:	
Position:		Date	

Question 5: Is there someone else that might be able to confirm this story?

5.1 ☐ No ☐ Yes (Please provide the details below)

Person's Name & Surname:		Email:	
Person's Organization:		Cell phone:	
Position:			

Thank you for your time and attention to this task.

OFFICE USE ONLY:

Number:

Impact: 1-5 Individuals,
6 – 30 Individuals, 31 – 100
individuals; Organizational;
System Wide

Impact on Learners:
Significant, Tenuous, Not
Applicable

Impact on Teachers:
Significant, Tenuous, Not
Applicable

Change: Value; Attitude;
Skill; Knowledge, Individual
Behaviour, Organizational
Behaviour

Verified: Yes / Partly / No / Not
Yet