

The London Schools Excellence Fund
From inquiry to outcomes - The evaluation journey

Blog by Barbara Harrison,
Mayor's Education Inquiry Panel Member and Education Adviser to Project Oracle

My journey began when I served on the Mayor's Education Inquiry which set out recommendations for how the Mayor could help to support London schools. Then I helped Project Oracle to build the architecture and evaluation of the LSEF Fund, whilst supporting projects in building their evaluation capacity.

So, what a thrill it was to be present at the LSEF celebration event, as Munira so aptly described this, as "the end of the beginning". We have a lot to celebrate and share with the great work of the LSEF Projects and their impact now and for the future on our capital's schools.

For all of us on the Inquiry, the LSEF was a hugely exciting, ambitious, uniquely funded and collaborative response to our Report's recommendations. Challenges still face many schools and young Londoners, despite London's overall success; and we need this great city to keep its competitive edge.

The founding principle for the LSEF was the belief that, investing in teachers, increasing their professional confidence and expertise, and growing networks of talent is at the heart of raising standards and the aspirations and achievement of all young Londoners

To prove that belief in the context of such a high stakes, and high value Fund, we needed to secure robust evidence of impact. We were determined to build a more lasting learning culture, shaped by evidence across our schools, so that the lessons of that investment (and of informed and tested innovation) could be sustained and replicated beyond the life of the Fund.

Through that evidence gathering process, we wanted to create a shared set of learnings and a legacy to help shape the next steps for how funders and commissioners work. As well as build a community able to operate as "learning organisations" as part of a self sustaining peer led system.

To deliver those ambitions, the GLA put in place a three level evaluation framework, built around high level final reports and case studies from the individual projects; aligning and validating project outcomes against the Project Oracle Standards and Levels; and commissioning a wide-scale meta-evaluation and thematic evaluation from SQW.

It was rightly ambitious, but time constrained route to travel, and all involved needed to adapt to early learnings. The GLA reviewed the milestones and invested significantly in resources to support projects at different stages. Whilst at Project Oracle, our own role also evolved as we moved from project implementation to the projects interim, then final reports and on through the process of final validation against the levels.

From the outset, we created a range of templates, best practice guides and transferable tools which are shared on the [LSEF resource hub](https://www.london.gov.uk/node/29678) <https://www.london.gov.uk/node/29678>. Key to this was the overall Self-Evaluation Framework, which set out the GLA's theory of change, underpinning the life of the Fund and its intended outcomes.

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We were able to adapt the GLA and Project Oracle support very quickly responding to projects' very different starting points, scale and capacity by providing increasingly bespoke, flexible and creative approaches. These included targeted training and workshops; drop in days and surgeries; bespoke visits and calls; webinars and web based approaches; with the focus shifting across the journey to the projects sharing their **own** learnings and case studies...

There were early messages too for the projects themselves, with the Interim report providing something of a major staging point and, as SQW's initial evaluation showed, a need to reflect and adjust.

So what were some of those early reflections?

The most overwhelming message was the critical importance to the architecture of the project of a high quality, credible theory of change (TOC), rooted in an understanding of need; the logic trail as some would call it. This must link-up the activities and inputs to the outcomes, and be able to attribute the impact with some confidence to those specific inputs. At the Interim report stage, many of projects had still not articulated that sufficiently coherently, and indeed some of the most successful projects went back to adjust their TOC, having recognized its weakness

Another key message was the difficulties around collecting data; access to it; its consistency and validity; not having established a clear enough baseline at the outset to measure impact, or set up clear enough expectations across the various partners as to what would be required; how to ensure the reliability of quantitative data....?

Differentiation was an issue again in meeting the needs of the various beneficiaries, or discovering that the needs and the underlying problem had not been adequately scoped at the outset.

Most importantly, a cultural shift took place towards the evaluation process itself. The most successful projects coming to see the evaluation as a key tool to shape and improve the outcome rather than a means to an end. The evaluation helped with realizing the funding goals as well as a high quality Final report for capturing and sharing their learning.

The LSEF has seen a great distance travelled. It's been a great learning journey, with remarkable levels of success in projects being validated at the higher Standards, and showing a level of clarity and detail well above expectations, even within the pressured timescale. And that higher level success has been seen across a diverse group of providers and projects, ranging from single school to HE led initiatives, with so many great stories to tell. ...

For many, whether through the GLA's Legacy Fund, through the next stage of their project's replication, or through aiming for validation at the next level, it will be part of an on-going journey- to ensure that gathering evidence of what works and sharing that learning continues to be at the heart of a peer led learning community.

Barbara Harrison 8th March '16.