Blazing an evaluation pathway: Lessons learned from applying utilization-focused evaluation to a conservation education program

Alice B. Flowers

Abstract

In 2005, state fish and wildlife agency wanted to examine how one of its conservation education programs was providing science-based understanding and outdoor experiences by evaluating students' knowledge, skills, attitudes and intended behavioral outcomes related to fish, fishing and aquatic habitats in Montana. A key factor in this study was the acceptance by program stakeholders to conduct the evaluation using a utilization-focused evaluation approach to promote usability and accuracy of evaluation results. Using a quasi-experimental non-equivalent group design, more than 2000 students in participating classrooms throughout Montana received a pre-survey, more than 1200 students in participating classrooms received a post-survey, and 114 teachers participated in an internet-based survey.
post-survey and an extended post-survey; 114 teachers participated in an Internet survey and 16 program instructors took part in a structured open-ended telephone interview. The participatory approach and mixed methods enhanced abilities to interpret results of student surveys in particular. The user-focused approach was discovered to be personal and situational, allowed the facilitation of the evaluation process with consideration for increased application of evaluation findings and implementation of recommendations from beginning to end. Further development of evaluation pathways is needed to more effectively evaluate outcomes and implement practical and transferable measures to determine if environmental education activities produce desired participant outcomes.

Keywords
Conservation education; Student outcomes; Place-based education; Program effectiveness; Utilization-focused evaluation

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