The Complexity of Practice: Participant Observation and Values Engagement in a Responsive Evaluation of a Professional Development School Partnership

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Abstract

All social and professional practices are historically situated, evolving forms of acting and interacting. Evaluation, as a practice, is shaped by and shapes the practice evaluated. This article contributes to responsive and values-engaged evaluation approaches by reflecting on the space where these two practices intersect. The evaluative task was to document the nature of a partnership between a university and school district and how that partnership was being carried out in the form of a professional development school. The authors focus on the role that participant observation, as an interactive and responsive form of engagement, played in the evaluation. Through two lenses—observing the partners and observing ourselves—the authors critically reflect on their decision-making processes, assessing their accomplishments and shortcomings. The authors conclude by considering how they might further their engagement as values-engaged evaluators in this context in ways that support the development of both the evaluators and the evaluand.

Keywords

responsive evaluation, values-engaged evaluation, participant observation, practice

> Receptivity to the problem is called for rather than keenness to master it with a solution.
>
> Dunne (2005, p. 377)

All social and professional practices are historically situated, evolving forms of acting and interacting (Dunne, 2005; Green, 2009; Kemmis, 2009). Evaluation, as a practice, is replete with competing ideas about its purpose and method. Less discussed is the way in which evaluation practice is shaped

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by and shapes the practice evaluated. Inherent to evaluation approaches such as responsive evaluation (Abma, 2005; Greene & Abma, 2001; Stake, 1975), culturally responsive evaluation (Hood, Hopson, & Frierson, 2005; Hopson, 2009; Thompson-Robinson, Hopson, & SenGupta, 2004), contextually responsive evaluation (Thomas & Stevens, 2004), values-engaged evaluation (Greene, DeStefano, Burgon, & Hall, 2006), and practice-oriented evaluation (Schwandt, 2002, 2005) is some form of attentiveness to the evaluand suggesting that closer examination of this interaction is warranted. We ask, how do evaluators make sense of, and respond to, the practice of interest? What considerations and values are engaged?

In this article, our evaluand can be characterized as a network of people, organizations, interests, policies, and programs manifested in the actions, interactions, and outcomes of a professional development school (PDS). In reality, however, our evaluand is the unbounded and nebulous partnership between a school district, a PDS, a community, and a university's college of education, referred to as PDS partners, making presentation of a specific practice difficult. A focus on practice, however, helps us consider how our evaluation work has so far connected the goals of the PDS with the actions and beliefs of the PDS partners, and what it might include as we move forward. Specifically, how has participant observation, a central feature of our evaluation design, contributed to the evaluation? First, we provide a brief overview of the literature on practice and how our view of practice-oriented evaluation informed our evaluation design. Then we describe in greater detail the practice we evaluated as well as our evaluation approach. Finally, two "analytic narrative vignettes" (Erickson, 1986, p. 150) focus on key episodes in the evaluation that illustrate the dynamic nature of interpretive work. Using dual lenses (i.e., observing others and observing ourselves) allows us to present ways that *being there* is more than a data collection activity; it is the interactive context where meaning and understanding of self and others takes place.

Practice-Oriented Evaluation

Schwandt (2005) distinguishes between a narrow and a broad view of the relationship between evidence, practice, and evaluation that serves the purpose of this article well. In the narrow view, the program being evaluated is understood through an instrumentalist view of evidence as those components of a practice that either assist or hamper the accomplishment of the desired end point. In this view, evaluation is closely aligned with measurement, and the tools of measurement and their levels of accuracy are seen as solutions to human problems.

In the broader view, the components of the evaluand are understood dynamically as part of a complex network of human activity and decision making embedded in the particular contexts and discourses that give it shape.

> Practice in this view demands a dialectic process of working back and forth from the case at hand to established knowledge, values, and commitments. This way of reasoning is hermeneutic—it signals that what is involved here is an interpretation of the situation based on understanding or grasping the relevant features of the case at hand in concert with values, principles, and standing commitments, such that one is able to see an appropriate and effective way of acting. (Schwandt, 2005, p. 98)

It is the second, broader view that guides our evaluation work, what Schwandt calls *practice-oriented evaluation*. In this approach, the intersections between evaluation and the practice evaluated are more closely attended to in the back and forth movement between data generation and analysis. Both are understood as interconnected events that are discursive, social–political, and values-engaged in nature. Both are affected by the presence of the other in ways that cannot be predicted or controlled, and the goal here is not to predict or control but to gain some understanding of, and insight into, these intersecting events. Moreover, in practice-oriented evaluation, the biases that

arise through the process of the "interpretation of the situation," while challenging, are considered productive and normal.

Participant Observation as Being Responsive and Values Engaged

Although some evaluators see little difference between research and evaluation, others suggest that one of evaluation's distinctions is how it prioritizes the involvement of stakeholders in the process of judging the value, merit, or worth of the program or practice being evaluated (Mathison, 2008). For the latter group, the decision has less to do with whether to seek out and include stakeholder perspectives but how, and for what reason. The literature on ethnography (Adler & Adler, 1994; Angrosino, 2005; Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Lofland & Lofland, 1995), ethnographic evaluation (Camino, 1997; Dorr-Bremme, 1985; Fetterman & Pitman, 1986; Harklau & Norwood, 2005; Hopson, 2002, 2005), and responsive evaluation (Abma, 2005; Greene & Abma, 2001; Hood et al., 2005; Stake, 1975) highlights participant observation as a significant strategy for connecting with stakeholders' perspectives.

Participant observation is a data collection approach that situates the researcher within the social field under study. Its overriding assumption is that such immersion is necessary for outside researchers to understand how people in a particular context construct meaning, order reality, and experience the world (Adler & Adler, 1994; Becker, 1958; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002; Emerson, 1981). Adler and Adler (1994) explain:

> Qualitative observation is fundamentally naturalistic in essence; it occurs in the natural context of occurrence, among the actors who would naturally be participating in the interaction, and follows the natural stream of everyday life. As such, it enjoys the advantage of drawing the observer into the phenomenological complexity of the world, where connections, correlations, and causes can be witnessed as and how they unfold. Qualitative observers are not bound, thus, by predetermined categories of measurement or response, but are free to search for concepts or categories that appear meaningful to subjects. (p. 378)

In evaluation, "an underlying assumption [of participant observation] is that understanding the evaluand will be enhanced by an insider or empathetic view, one that requires assuming at least marginally a position of being in the context" (Mathison, 2005, p. 290). Among other advantages, "being there" can (1) provide contextual understanding of program processes and stakeholders' perspectives and experiences, (2) alter an evaluator's preconceptions by broadening his or her understanding of a program's theory-in-practice, and (3) promote an evaluator's critical reflexivity toward evaluation practice and the evaluand. Although participant observation raises several methodological issues, our interest here is to consider its interactive qualities and challenges. What do we think we are accomplishing when we engage in participant observation? How do we see ourselves participating with members of the setting? What is the desired outcome of the relationships with others built within participant observation activities?

Following Angrosino's (2005) suggestion, we examine participant observation as "a context for interaction among those involved in the research collaboration" (Angrosino, 2005, p. 732). This understanding supports ethnographic and responsive evaluation and can be thought of as a way to give priority to Stake's (1975) notion of "response." He states: "responsive evaluation is an alternative, an old alternative, based on what people do naturally to evaluate things, they observe and react" (p. 14). These responses are not private subjective musings but are issues and questions that emerge in context and are coconstructed in interaction with others, and as such, get recirculated back into the context through additional interactions with stakeholders. In this way, the evaluator builds on his or her and others' genuine responsiveness to issues and values that arise in the evaluation (Hood & Hopson, 2008; Stake, 1975), in such a way as to foster dialogue, deliberation, and democratic engagement (Ryan & DeStefano, 2000).

By conceptualizing responsive evaluation as active, reactive, dialogic, and values engaged, we prioritize participant observation as a way of engagement, a relationship that is already "intervening" in the daily routines of a program. "Being there," therefore, is more than a method and involves an awareness and documentation of one's being-in-practice (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). As the evaluator records evidence of "what is going on in the field," he or she is also generating evidence concerning his or her evaluation practice, since contact conversations, design decisions, and shifts of focus become part of the program being evaluated (Camino, 1997). The evaluation report thus becomes a negotiated account of the worth, value, qualities, strengths, and weaknesses of the program or practice evaluated and highlights the depth and breadth of the evaluator–stakeholder interaction.

Negotiating a Practice-Oriented Evaluation of the Synergy School

Synergy[1] Professional Development Elementary School opened August 6, 2009, to serve over 500 pre K–5 students. With a free and reduced lunch rate of 99.75%, the school opened as a targeted Title I school and became a school-wide Title I school in 2010. Sixty-six percent of the school's population is Latino, 23% Black, 8% White, and 3% Multiracial. There are 44 faculty and instructional staff. All teachers are certified in their teaching areas and many have additional endorsements in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), gifted, or reading education. The PDS model being implemented at Synergy is the result of collaboration between Iris School District (ISD), a community action group (CAG), and faculty from a nearby College of Education (COE). In 2008, members of these groups formed a committee with the intent of creating a professional development or charter school. The Professional Development School Partners Committee (PDSPC) made some initial implementation decisions, such as hiring a PDS liaison who coordinates Synergy and COE needs and resources; conducting university preservice teachers methods courses at Synergy; adopting a School-Wide Enrichment Model; holding monthly PDSPC meetings at Synergy; and putting together a group (Evaluation [EVAL]) comprised of Synergy and COE representatives to discuss and develop research and evaluation projects aimed at documenting Synergy's efforts.

We had been invited to participate in the EVAL team by a university partner because we taught research and evaluation courses at the university. During discussions with the EVAL group, we described the contribution that an external evaluation could make and were asked to put forward an evaluation proposal that would document Synergy's development. Our evaluation team is comprised of the only members of this research group who were external to the PDS collaboration and who had the time and interest to devote to a nonfunded evaluation.[2] Melissa Freeman is White and bilingual; she spent her formative school years in a French-speaking country. Jori N. Hall is Black and a former middle school teacher from Chicago. Additionally, our team was composed of a professor of art education and a doctoral student in gifted education, both White women, and a Latina doctoral student in language and literacy education. These combined cultural features and areas of expertise helped us connect with a range of stakeholders. This article focuses solely on the observational work conducted by the two authors on the nature of the partnership, as they were the ones attending the PDSPC meetings and conducting the bulk of the school-based observations.

As responsive, values-engaged evaluators (Greene et al., 2006) we sought out the perspectives of multiple stakeholders in the development of our evaluation plan. For example, we received input from the EVAL team, the PDSPC, Synergy's principal, the family engagement specialist, an ESOL teacher, a community advocate for the Latino community, five teachers, and seven parents. Analysis of this input suggested that while stakeholders were concerned about what the PDS would deliver in terms of specific impact and outcomes on instruction and student achievement, they lacked a

Table 1. Key Stakeholder and Main Evaluator Values Focused Upon in the Evaluation

Key Stakeholder Values	Main Evaluator Values
Collaboration	Responsive action
Partnership	Values engagement
Innovative instructional practices	Formative feedback
Student achievement	Democratic processes
Professional development	Critical dialogue

Note. Key stakeholder values were identified (as issues) during the conduct of the evaluation. Main evaluators' values were intentionally engaged to enact the value commitments of the responsive and values-engaged evaluation frameworks.

common understanding of the school's goals, which included promoting innovative practices, supporting collaboration among PDS partners, and strengthening the relationship between the school and the community. As a result, we proposed a formative evaluation that focused on three broad areas: the nature of the PDS collaboration, key internal accountability practices and procedures, and the relationship between Synergy Elementary School and the community context. We were transparent about the value we placed on elucidating stakeholders' beliefs and understandings and the role these played in the success of the PDS. We were also clear about our desire to provide feedback to, and foster dialogue among, PDS partners as part of the formative evaluation, but did not elaborate on what that would look like since ethnographic and responsive evaluation approaches assume time in the field prior to issue identification and responsive action. Table 1 highlights the key stakeholder values that were most attended to in the evaluation, as well as the values that we, the main evaluators, brought to the context.

Our data collection activities embodied traditional ethnographic evaluation methods. We observed broadly to get a sense of what was going on in the setting. This included the monthly PDSPC meetings and school leadership meetings, professional development for teachers, Parent–Teacher Organization and other school events for families, classroom teaching across grade levels, and school-wide enrichment activities. We talked informally with teachers, parents, students, community members, and conducted interviews with members of the PDSPC, teachers and resource teachers, community members, as well as focus groups with third- and fifth-grade students and parents. In reality, of course, participant observation and responsiveness are always negotiations of values that surface and can be challenged unexpectedly in our evaluation practice. In other words, we do not often know what value is being prioritized until we find ourselves reacting to particular instances and then making a decision based on sometimes careful, and at other times impulsive, consideration. Like Hall, Ahn, and Greene (2011) we acknowledge that values engagement[3] has a descriptive component as well as a prescriptive one that intersect and compete against each other in practice.

Responsiveness, as a core value guiding our evaluation process, embodies this struggle. It denotes both commitment and action to prioritize the emic perspective of stakeholders. For example, although the overall goal of the evaluation was to document the evolution of the new school's partnership, we knew that our commitment to democratic practices and critical dialogue would lead us to observe and react to achievements and deficiencies in these areas. At the same time, we were mindful of the ways different partners might realize their own social justice agendas, so responsiveness also involved holding back in favor of insiders' own responsive actions. Thus, we believe that observing silently can have as much effect as participating actively. We sought to understand how our values and responses, and those of our stakeholders, contributed to the development of the focal practices. Practice-oriented evaluation consistently brought our analyses back to the connections between our practices and those of the stakeholders. In the next sections, we present examples of

how this occurred and consider their implications for furthering values engaged and practice-oriented evaluation.

Observing the Partners

As members of the EVAL group, we were already attending the monthly PDSPC meetings. As we transitioned into our role as external evaluators, having presented a proposal to the PDS partners that they approved, we continued to attend these meetings. Thus, we found ourselves at midyear sitting around the same table as the partners but holding a quite different position, manila pads out, writing down everything we could. For the most part we sat silently, only speaking when it was our turn on the agenda to report on the evaluation. However, in situations when the group actively engaged in planned activities such as classroom observations, we participated as partners.

Observing the partners revealed a story of commitment to and desire for a partnership impaired by preexisting politics and power structures. We watched as individuals representing university, community, school, and district partnering groups enacted their partnership, mindful of, but never openly addressing, the ambiguous foundation they were standing on. Although the school had been planned "together," most of the decisions about hiring and curriculum were decided by the district with little or no input from the larger partnering group. Furthermore, several previous partnerships had ended poorly with district partners feeling as if university partners had been too critical of district practices and too assertive with their own agendas. With this history as the backdrop, we watched as the PDSPC meetings became a site for celebratory updates rather than critical discussion of the mission and vision of a PDS. Explicit values were expressed through words like "collaboration," "professional development," and "excellence in teaching," with little or no discussion about what these terms meant to this group in this school context. District members articulated their appreciation for university partners with statements such as "you folks are different" and "when university people come in and support teachers that's meaningful work," supporting the partnership but also cautioning partners not to overstep unspoken boundaries. In meetings comprised of university-only members, this tension became a recurrent theme as they openly discussed how to interact with the larger group in a way that would not negate the progress they believed they had made working with district members, even while feeling they were "taking baby steps," as one member was fond of saying.

Understanding the nature of the tensions between the partnering groups would not have occurred had we not been participant observers in these encounters. Further understanding of this issue occurred halfway through the year, when the PDS partners chose to conduct small group classroom observations during their monthly meetings. The idea emerged during the December meeting when a university partner led the group in a paired dialogue activity to "reflect on the first semester as a PDS" and one of the hopes expressed was to get into the classroom and see what was going on. During the January and February meetings, PDS partners formed groups comprised of university, school, district, and community partners and conducted two 15-min observations in two different classrooms.

Although this seems like a harmless activity, it caused considerable angst. Concerns about misinterpretations and negative evaluations of what would be observed in the classrooms were raised repeatedly. Rather than discuss the source of these fears, it was decided that the school principal would come up with two questions to direct the observations. Furthermore, partners were reminded to take note of what they were seeing descriptively, not evaluatively. We participated actively in these observations using them as an opportunity to widen our repertoire of classroom observations while gaining a deeper understanding of what mattered to or stood out for different partners. Observing this activity proved fruitful especially as we sought ways to interpret the partners' actions and interactions in light of the difficulties we felt they were having around dialogue. As one might

expect, the first thing we noticed was how this activity revealed assumptions each partnering group had about the others and the role these assumptions played in impeding possible attempts to engage in discussion.

For example:

- when a community partner returning from observing a kindergarten classroom commented that he was impressed that the students could move from what looked like organized chaos to sudden quiet attention, the assistant principal explained that the ''chaos'' results from the state standards requiring unsupervised reading time during the day;
- when a district partner commented that he was impressed with how all the students were on task and how rigorous the lesson seemed, the principal—anticipating his next question, ''is this typical?''—interjected that this was not a setup, she did not just pick top classrooms;
- when a university partner commented that she appreciated watching a teacher use student input to develop a lesson rather than just follow a textbook lesson, a district partner stated that it is easy to assume that veteran teachers know how to do this but they need training.

Our first interpretation of these interactions was that coming together as a partnering group is not sufficient ground for developing the conditions for dialogue about partnering. Rather than understand that these statements might have been grounds for exploring perceptions of what is assumed to matter to district, community, university, and school partners, the statements were perceived by us as issues and problems needing justification or explanation. In other words, the statements were heard as unspoken questions or critiques partners assumed other partners held about each other and each other's beliefs about education. What we felt was missing in these encounters was the ability for partners to build on the statements and use them to talk about the practice of education and the role a PDS could play in advancing that practice. (In fairness to the partners, such attempts were made during large group debriefings after the observations but time always interfered with their ability to get very far.)

Observing the partners' inability to break free from the constraints of their history was frustrating. Simultaneously, however, we began to consider other ways to think about what the practice of developing a partnership might entail. Shifting our lens from one of reactivity that prioritized our valuing (as well as that of some university partners) of critical dialogue to one of attentiveness to the relational practice itself provided an alternative interpretation of these interactions. Although we believe the hierarchical nature of the partners' relationship creates real barriers to the kinds of conversations we were hoping to witness in these meetings, we began to understand that deliberations about the practice of the partnership were occurring at every single meeting, not as critical dialogue (as we had narrowly assumed was necessary), but as a giving and taking of informational and material resources. We began to see that each member was actively participating in group interactions in ways that situated him or herself in the developing partnership in a meaningful and productive fashion, despite power and status differences. Members were indicating that they could furnish the group with valuable informational and material resources (Cook & Whitmeyer, 1992; Molm, 2006). For example, alternative conceptualizations of the previous episodes might be:

- when the community partner showed interest in a particular classroom practice he was seeking understanding, which the assistant principal was able to offer because of her leadership role regarding curriculum in the school;
- when the district partner commented on the students' on-task behavior, the principal was able to assert that the gift of access she was offering into her classrooms was a genuine one, and was a genuine view of everyday practice;

- when the university and district partners exchanged views on teaching they were simultaneously offering a shared commitment to professional development, and the possibility of working together on what that might mean.

Although we knew the lack of dialogue was frustrating to some partners, we began to realize that the partnership could not succeed without a genuine relationship built on trust, and that trust in this case could not simply be the commitment to shed past intergroup issues; it had to be enacted. In this case, it was being enacted, not as many including ourselves assumed, through dialogue; it was being enacted in this open exchange of valued resources that members of the networking groups felt they could offer the partnership (Cook, 2005; Cook, Cheshire, & Gerbasi, 2006). Although neither interpretation described here provides a complete picture of this developing partnership, considering the evidence from multiple perspectives enriches our interpretive capacities to make sense of, and consider next steps, in documenting and reporting this process.

Observing Ourselves

Observations of the PDS partners left us feeling uncertain about the actions we should, or could, take during the conduct of the evaluation. Our responsive process helped us identify competing interpretations of what was going on among partners. Additionally, several stakeholders informed us that the broad access to school and committee practices we had negotiated to observe raised concerns about confidentiality risks, so we were cautious about the nature of the information we might circulate back to our stakeholders. Simultaneously, as witnesses to meetings and events, we were often called on to take note of activities or statements in ways that suggested that our documentation was an important part of the process. However, we also knew that part of our task involved establishing a position of trust as professional evaluators working independently from the university partners with whom we were naturally seen as aligned.

Fortunately, we had an existing place on the monthly meeting agenda to provide feedback to the partners on what we were doing or learning. We considered this place as an invitation to integrate ourselves more productively into their developmental process. Seeking ways to understand how we might achieve this integration, we started to observe our evaluation practices more closely and more critically. For example, prior to (and shortly after) each PDSPC meeting, we would discuss the meeting's agenda, debrief how we perceived we had participated, and consider how we might participate in an upcoming meeting. Our participation in the next meeting would be influenced by these discussions and by other relevant observations.

As mentioned previously, the partners' interactions revealed more about preexisting tensions among the groups than insights into the mission and vision of the PDS. Although the school had a mission statement on its website, it was the general one used by the district and not, as might be assumed, one developed by the partners. Early in their discussions, the PDSPC developed goals for the PDS and guidelines for creating a PDS. However, these statements were not brought up during committee meetings, leaving our understanding of what the school was accomplishing and how partners were conceptualizing the partnership as a task for our ongoing analysis. Building on observations such as the ones outlined in the first vignette and informal conversations with the partners, we began to identify conflicting levels of satisfaction with how well the PDS partnership was progressing. Furthermore, it became clear that these differences reflected varying notions of what it meant to be a PDS. Among them, two stood out. For some, a PDS was seen as an equal three-way partnership among the ISD, CAG, and the COE. From this perspective, PDS partners had equal voice when making decisions about instruction, curriculum, and related professional development activities implemented at the school. In contrast, others regarded the partnership as the COE and CAG serving ISD professional development or other curricular and instructional initiatives. For these stakeholders, the

COE and CAG were partners useful for *informing* decisions made by the district and school rather than having equal authority in actually making decisions. Not only was this a significant issue but one we reflected would be difficult for an individual partner to bring up during the meeting, considering the group's political and relational history. As we moved into the end of the first year, we felt it would be appropriate for us as external observers to raise this matter. Having decided on a focal point for a more participatory, values-engaged approach, we grappled with determining what exactly this would involve.

Our struggle to engage various conceptualizations of a PDS was particularly burdensome because we were usually scheduled for the last 5 min on the agenda. During the first year, we did not intervene to change this. As participant observers, we valued the evaluation data gained by attending to the way we were invited and integrated into, or excluded from, various events. At the time, we felt, much like the partners described in the first vignette, that we needed to earn the stakeholders' trust and that this would come over time when we were recognized as resources to their process. We considered this intervention to be one way of promoting such a view.

We decided that our intervention would seek out further information on how the partners were conceiving the PDS. Because the partners' committee was comprised of representative members of the PDS partnership, and was considered the PDS's decision-making or advisory body, we thought that initiating reflection on the nature of the committee might serve as a stepping stone for conversations about the nature of the PDS. That is, rather than asking abstract questions such as, "What is a PDS?" or "What does a PDS mean to you?" we focused on a more concrete question: "What key moments stood out for you during the year as a PDS partners' committee?" It was our hope that giving the partners time to reflect and write about these actions, activities, and interactions would provide a space for questions and conversation about the values and beliefs related to the practice of the PDS. Our thinking was that the examples generated from the prompt would lead to insights about how the PDSPC was operating, and how the PDSPC was intended to work.

Our prompt was placed on the PDSPC meeting agenda for the March meeting. However, on the day of the meeting, many key partners were not present (e.g., most of the school district representatives). We were asked to withhold our prompt until the next meeting when more members were expected, and we agreed to postpone the in-person discussion. One of the district members requested that we send the prompt via e-mail so that all members could come prepared to discuss their responses at the next meeting in May. In short, our prompt was not used as intended that day. To say the least, we were disappointed at not being able to engage the committee members as planned.

We were unable to revisit the prompt at the May meeting. We were, yet again, the last item on the agenda and only a few minutes remained of the time allotted for us to speak. Because we felt pressured under this time constraint, we decided to only provide an update of the evaluation. In addition, no one had responded to the prompt via e-mail. Consequently, we decided that the best thing to do would be to incorporate the prompt into our interview questions. We deemed this as a successful strategy because the data collected helped us further understand stakeholders' perspectives on the PDS.

On the whole, this example suggests how we as evaluators attempted to be responsive to what we observed. It builds on the notion of a feedback loop: a formative way of responding to what is occurring in the evaluation context in service of program development. We wanted to help partners see areas in which evaluation could offer more than a summative report, to grasp the "goods" we offered through the practice of formative evaluation. We wanted the partners to realize that formative evaluation can facilitate midcourse corrections and figuring out next steps. We are still working on that message. Thus, the example is also an illustration about the difficulty of intervening—even after a thoughtful plan is made. It reflects the tensions between what we do as evaluators and the practices of the evaluand.

Discussion and Conclusion: The Complexity of Practice

Guided by practice-oriented, responsive, and values-engaged evaluation approaches, we used participant observation to enhance understanding of the tensions, constraints, and processes that PDS stakeholders negotiated as their partnership evolved and also to promote critical reflexivity toward our evaluation practice. We witnessed the partners engage in their partnership practice, in which members of the networking groups showed themselves as valuable resources. Much like traders in an open market, members needed to convince others that the ''goods'' they offer will benefit the goals of the partnership. Although at first we narrowly interpreted these interactions as requiring the form of critical dialogue to be valuable to the developmental process, thinking of these exchanges as a necessary part of how value, trust, and interdependency (Cook, 2005; Cook et al., 2006) are developed was eye-opening. We began to realize how crucial these face-to-face meetings were for the success of the partnership. In the same way that participant observation allowed us to use the complexity of the interactions we observed to consider multiple interpretations of these interactions, the partners were presenting themselves to others as trustworthy and valuable resources. As we sought ways to open our analysis to more effectively account for the complexities inherent in any new partnership, the partners were using a variety of strategies to bring to the table practices and values that not only mattered to them but articulated what they hoped would become part of a shared set of values and beliefs.

Through our observations, we have come to appreciate the goods being offered and the circumstances under which exchanges occur, especially in contexts where the interdependency of the partners is on tenuous ground. But more importantly, we realize that the exchanges made during partner meetings, whether they involved pedagogical practices or access to classrooms and other physical and material resources, were all expressions of beliefs and values seeking a residence in the new partnership. Some of the exchanges resulted in positive outcomes while others, such as the small group classroom observations, were perceived as too evaluative in nature, causing concern among the classroom teachers and administrators, and were discontinued. Despite the varied consequences, we interpreted these exchanges as values- and trust-building acts—relational practices necessary for the development of the partner committee as a foundation for other forms of exchanges and engagements. These exchanges build links between what matters to partners about PDS practices and encourage critical dialogue among partners concerning areas of disagreement.

As others (Kemmis, 2009; Schwandt, 2005) have suggested, we agree that evaluators have the responsibility to help stakeholders critically reflect on the goals and outcomes of their practices, especially when it is perceived that a lack of critical reflection might impede developmental efforts. That was one reason for facilitation of reflection and conversation on the meaning and value of the PDS partnership. A second reason was to demonstrate the capacity-building virtues of our approach. We were a part of a developing network of resources and needed to be recognized as a valued good if we were going to be invited back. However, as the second vignette illustrates, due to contextual factors (i.e., lack of meeting attendance, being the last agenda item, activity postponement, etc.), our approach was not implemented as intended and our dual goals were not wholly met. We believe that the recognition we sought was partially achieved when we provided the partners with our report, a detailed narrative of themes and issues documenting the three evaluation focal areas. Although a discussion of the issues highlighted in the report was never fully realized, the report was well received and several of its suggestions have played a central role in the developmental process. For example, face-to-face meetings continue to be valued and the PDS liaison is understood by all parties to be key to the development of the committee's shared values.

We were invited by the partners to conduct a second evaluation focusing on similar broad areas (i.e., the PDS collaboration, accountability practices, and the experiences of students). This invitation has made us more aware of our developmental process as evaluators and of the relationship we

have established with the partners. We believe our role as participant observers was instrumental in our becoming viewed, to an extent, as "trusted partners" by the partnership members. We now find ourselves with more opportunities to generate critical reflection in terms of quietly observing and actively engaging partners in ways that make visible to them the valued goods we represent. More importantly, we have a greater understanding of the nature of responsiveness and values engagement in relation to practice-oriented evaluation. The challenge for evaluators is not only recognizing which values are being enacted and when, but grasping that a stance of responsiveness can give rise to multiple values that compete with one another. The decision to downplay one value while fostering another needs to be based on what is considered best for both the evaluation and the evaluand. What links the two vignettes is that they represent our attempts to be receptive to a developmental process where both the end point and the process for getting there are being constructed and reconstructed anew. Keeping our interpretations open to multiple meanings provided stakeholders with evidence of our continued support of this process.

We are currently in the mid of our second PDS evaluation. The exchange of material and intellectual goods continues as a positive force in the development and expansion of the partnership. For example, in our most recent observation of a partners' meeting, we witnessed a more spontaneous and less celebratory tone as partners discussed the adequacy of resources for, and the quality of instruction in, one of the new initiatives being implemented. At this same meeting, we sought feedback from partners on their desires and interests regarding future evaluation work. We asked to be placed first on the agenda, provided a brief overview of what we had accomplished the first year, and discussed what we were currently focusing on. We requested that the attending partners think about these areas, as well as others, and write down questions they would like us to consider as we put forward a plan for next year's evaluation. As a result of this activity, the partners are beginning to see us as resources for the school's development in a more participatory way. As we collected the index cards containing these questions, a district partner suggested that we bring back the written comments and facilitate decision making about the purpose of another evaluation of the school's partnership practices. We deem this a significant accomplishment as it substantiates their perception of us as PDS partners and demonstrates their confidence in our capacity to foster development of the PDS beyond summative evaluation reports. Moving forward, we hope that our role in this context will continue to develop. Specifically, we desire to engage partners in more dialogue on critical issues of teaching, learning, and who controls the partnership. Additionally, we wish to include more intentional data collection activities on the nature of the goods and resources being circulated among the partners and the role these goods play in the developing partnership. Finally, we wish to continue to find strategies that uphold our goal of stakeholder participation, with a commitment to supporting the deliberation of its value and meaning.

Notes

1. All place and group names are pseudonyms.
2. Later our college of education and our department provided financial support for our work, for which we are grateful.
3. Hall, Ahn, and Greene (2011) describe values engagement as involving the intentional description of stakeholder values and issues in an evaluation context, as well as fostering particular values such as the democratic ideal of equity.

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