Reviewer’s report

Title: Using developmental evaluation to enhance continuous reflection, learning and adaptation of an innovation platform in Australian Indigenous primary health care

Version: 0 Date: 21 Nov 2019

Reviewer: Benjamin Daniels

Reviewer's report:

This manuscript makes a clear case for the need for complex interventions to solve hard problems. In particular, I am pleased to see the authors acknowledge the need for new models of evaluation partnerships that "allow evaluators to provide rapid feedback to program implementers”, particularly through engagement with people at all levels of the health system.

The framework of "improving rather than proving” and "moving away from 'what is planned’" is also particularly relevant to the development scene today. It is truly the case that we need better models of embedded engagement with field teams in order to be both useful in real-time during the process of conducting research as well as to be able to produce rigorous research syntheses retrospectively.

In particular, I believe this takes extensive planning of the systems that will be used throughout the intervention, such that embedded research teams have continuous access to programmatic data that is structured and delivered to enable this kind of feedback without burdening any part of the collaboration. A framework for prioritizing rigorous data and decision-making systems at all stages is indeed essential to the success of such a project and is often overlooked by projects that are designed "for the field", making the kind of partnership described feel burdensome to all participants.

However, despite my positive sentiments about the framework described throughout the manuscript, I find that the manuscript can benefit immensely from more concrete approaches to these principles, including lessons and roadblocks. In my experience working with field partners, there is a great need to provide concrete examples of how data systems were developed to go beyond immediate field needs; how researchers can remain responsive to the program’s research questions and keep channels of communication open; and how partners can formulate short- and long-term questions and manage field flows to provide a balance between objectives and research rigor to answer them in a way that researchers find engaging and appropriate.

These practical components have been the hardest to communicate between partners and I feel that providing such frameworks and examples would make this piece a meaningful contribution to the necessary literature about these partnerships. Without concrete and specific examples, however, I am not sure that the general framework is sufficiently expansive upon the authors' previous work to stand as an independent piece, and these are currently absent from the piece.
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