Valuing beneficiary voice: Involving children living in out-of-home care in programme evaluation

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Abstract
This article charts the innovative evaluation journey an Australian nonprofit organisation, The Pyjama Foundation (PJF), has taken when designing an evaluation instrument to gain feedback from programme beneficiaries. PJF sought to develop a formal, targeted approach to hear the perspectives of children living in out-of-home care, who are involved with their Love of Learning educational programme. The design process included two focus group discussions with foster carers, programme volunteers, and child development experts. From this, an evaluation survey for children to use was developed. The survey’s underpinning conceptual framework, based on key protective factors influencing educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care, is a key contribution of this research. In addition, the design and implementation issues PJF encountered contribute insights for other nonprofit organisations and evaluators and academic knowledge towards evaluations involving children and vulnerable stakeholders. Hearing children’s views on programmes they are involved in is vital in helping to develop safe spaces for children to engage, where their thoughts are valued and opinions matter. As such, the processes detailed within this article support the development of evaluation practices that value children’s voices.

Keywords
beneficiaries, children, evaluation, nonprofit organisations, out-of-home care

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Introduction

Nonprofit organisations seek to ‘represent, speak and act on behalf of marginalised communities who lack the power to influence the wider constituents of society’ (Dhanani & Connolly, 2012, p. 1144). However, to authentically do so, organisations need mechanisms capable of enabling beneficiaries’ voices to be heard. Without such mechanisms, many organisations cannot gain feedback from their beneficiaries or act on their suggestions in service design (Schmitz et al., 2012). This limited ability to be heard may have far reaching consequences ranging from maintaining unsubstantiated beliefs about a programme, to potentially overlooking unintended or harmful consequences. Evans (2020) suggests that organisations need to be more aware of pre-existing beliefs about programme success and elevate the importance of stakeholder voices. This is a widespread issue and Jacobs and Wilford (2010) attribute the low volume of beneficiary voices in evaluation to their lack of power. Twersky et al. (2013) add in the cost and time needed to ensure beneficiary feedback is routinely solicited as a further barrier; reporting such feedback needs to be sought in a reliable, rigorous and useful way. Making such feedback part of the process can help an organisation learn if outcomes are being achieved and provide insights towards improving the effectiveness of programmes (Twersky et al., 2013). Therefore, the evaluation process offers dual benefits at the organisational and individual level (Cooper, 2017).

This article charts the innovative and potentially replicable evaluation journey taken by Australian nonprofit organisation The Pyjama Foundation (PJF), when designing an evaluation instrument to gain feedback from their programme beneficiaries who are children living in out-of-home care. Beginning operations in 2004, PJF has primarily used informal and indirect feedback from beneficiaries to support organisational learning and programme improvement. Theirs is a common scenario in nonprofit organisations where evaluation resourcing and capacity can be limited and evaluative thinking remains frequently underused, especially with potentially vulnerable stakeholders. PJF, however, sought to develop a formal, targeted approach to hear the perspectives of children in the programme and ‘enable a cost-effective, integrated, and informed use of evaluation’ (Newcomer, 2016, p. 81). The design and implementation issues PJF encountered contribute insights for other nonprofit organisations and evaluators and boost the academic knowledge around evaluations involving children and vulnerable stakeholders.

The development of this evaluation instrument is unique in two regards. First, it involves children living in out-of-home care (foster care or kinship care). Children enter the care system for a variety of reasons including illness or death of a parent, abuse, neglect or poverty (Sellers et al., 2020). Anecdotally, nonprofit human service organisations working with children living in out-of-home care have found that they need to express their views and be heard, yet how to collect direct feedback from this cohort remains under-investigated. Research shows nonprofit organisations have limited mechanisms to collect nationally representative views from children in vulnerable situations (Chapman et al., 2004; Goldfarb, et al., 2019). Second, the case provides a fresh conceptual underpinning, which draws on key protective factors influencing
educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care. In particular, this research furthers understanding about how programme outcomes can be identified by listening to children using a relational approach. The final evaluation instrument developed by PJF illustrates how nonprofit organisations can embed evaluation practices within human-centred programmes.

Background and research context

Improving outcomes for children living in out-of-home care

Currently, approximately 44,900 Australian children live in out-of-home care. These children commonly experience socio-economic disadvantage, trauma, poor mental and physical health (Mendes et al., 2014; Usher et al., 2018), suffer from low self-esteem and self-efficacy and experience behavioural and emotional problems (Cepukiene et al., 2018). These children collectively display poor educational outcomes (Mendis et al., 2015), impacting upon their ability to achieve in life (Cunha et al., 2010). Children living in out-of-home care often present social, cognitive and academic delays, all of which can affect the desired outcomes that an educational programme might wish to substantiate (Coman & Devaney, 2011; Jacobsen et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2011; Salahu-Din & Bollman, 1994; Salazar et al., 2013).

To improve the outcomes for children living in out-of-home care, PJF provides an educational programme, called ‘Love of Learning’. The programme’s theory of change states, ‘The Pyjama Foundation believes a trusted mentor supports a child living in out-of-home care to engage with and enjoy learning, helping them to thrive in school and life’ (Knight & Sheehan, 2020, p. 2). To implement the programme, adult volunteers known as Pyjama Angels, are recruited and trained each year to visit a child weekly at their foster care residence. Currently, 1,440 children are supported by their Pyjama Angel to read books, play educational games and complete their homework (The Pyjama Foundation, 2019, 2020). Each Pyjama Angel focuses on using these individualised learning-based activities to create a positive mentoring relationship with their mentee and foster academic resilience and self-efficacy (The Pyjama Foundation, 2020).

Evaluating the programme outcomes

The Love of Learning programme’s theory of change is informed by key protective factors influencing educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care (Knight & Rossi, 2018). These protective factors involve, ‘safe, kind and loving relationships with carers, mentors and teachers, which develop a child’s self-efficacy, their literacy skills and resilience while learning’ (Knight & Rossi, 2018, p. 26). In addition, a sense of belonging to school and a relational approach to pedagogy which places the human relationship (e.g., the mentor or foster child relationship) centrally have been identified as important (Knight & Rossi, 2018). These key factors informed the conceptual framework underpinning the evaluation instrument for children.
To backdrop the evaluation project, the next section surveys relevant literature and research that practically and theoretically frames the evaluation instrument’s development. It considers justification for involving children in evaluation processes, prior literature involving children in evaluation, potential challenges and the conceptual framework underpinning the evaluation instrument. The methodology used to develop the pilot instrument is then presented before design limitations are outlined and future directions considered. To create widest value, this article focuses on the evaluation design and piloting, rather than presenting specific beneficiary feedback about the Love of Learning programme.

**Literature review**

*Involving children in evaluation – rationales and methods*

Listening to what children say about their everyday lives and experiences can allow us to both theorize and act on their understandings in relation to larger issues of social and political change. (James, 2007, p. 267)

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child calls for the right of children to hold and express views in all matters affecting them (United Nations, 1989, p. 4). Broadly, the Convention encompasses children’s rights to provision, protection and participation (Theobald, 2019), and the right of children to have and to express their view on matters they are participating in. These matters include their participation in education and other community services.

The involvement of children and young people in evaluation is important to positively engage them in developmental processes (Purdue et al., 2018). Rationales for greater participation of youth across institutional and policy and practice arenas include their right to be involved and consulted, the improvement of services and developmental benefits for both themselves and for society as a whole (Head, 2011).

Evaluative research involving children as active participants in educational services deliberately utilises a range of research designs and methods including interviews, questionnaires, case studies and ethnography. This range enables multiple ways of hearing children’s voices. For example, to encourage children to reflect on their participation in learning activities, Smith et al. (2005) conducted interviews, focus groups and informal conversations with children. These researchers conclude that ‘children clearly have something useful and important to say about their activities and have the competence to tell us if we provide them with the appropriate scaffolding’ (Smith et al., 2005, p. 485, emphasis added). Hence, the mechanisms and processes become important to facilitate evaluation from children, in ways which are meaningful, empowering and valuable for both the children and service providers.

Multiple data collection channels can mean multiple data sources, and this too is important. This emerges for instance in *deliberative democratic evaluation* with its focus on inclusion, dialogue and deliberation (House & Howe, 2000). Researchers who advocate for children’s participation in evaluation, use age-appropriate and creative methodologies as part of a democratic process (Hreinsdottir & Davidsdottir, 2012;
An example is Hreinsdottir and Davidsdottir (2012) who employ the methodology of the *mosaic approach* to listening to children. This approach ‘... is about piecing together multiple types of data to help understand children’s views’, including (but not limited to) observation, conferencing, photography, mapping, role-play and drawing (Greenfield, 2011, p. 110). The mosaic approach has been used within research that seeks to understand children’s evaluative perspectives on their learning environments (Botsoglou et al., 2019), including neighbourhood planning (Azunre & Sowrirajan, 2020), being outdoors (Greenfield, 2011) and youth mentoring (Evans-Locke & Hsu, 2020).

In acknowledging children’s own authoritative position regarding their understandings of the world, qualitative methods, including individual and group interviews and children’s use of photography, collage, drawing and journal keeping, assisted Fattore et al. (2009) to learn children’s views of what constitutes their own well-being. Their findings emphasised the importance children place upon relationships with others, their emotional lives and their agency and control (Fattore et al., 2009). These findings draw parallels with those from Harris and Manatakis’ (2013) study involving consultations with children. Here, children discussed the importance of the environment, their family and friends, and activities and play, in relation to their local communities.

Questionnaires have also been used to access children’s views. For example, survey design was used to understand children and young peoples’ feelings of safety in out-of-home care contexts (Sellers et al., 2020) and the questionnaire items used by Chapman et al. (2004) were extensively tested to consider how to gain feedback from children in out-of-home care. Here, 12 questions pertained to the child’s relationship with their primary caregiver. Children 11 years of age and above \( (n=188) \) responded by listening to the questions with headphones and entering their answers directly into a laptop computer. This approach was to ensure the children felt their answers were private. The study’s authors acknowledge that the children’s answers about their caregivers may reflect social desirability rather than their true feelings and optimal levels of privacy were not always possible. However overall, the questionnaire was a useful and reliable way of gaining insights into the importance of promoting positive relationships between children and their caregivers. This study provides evidence that children in out-of-home care are willing and able to provide feedback about their relationships with adults and this feedback can be used to determine the impact on their well-being.

Other participatory research has used in-depth interviews to understand young people’s perceptions of out-of-home placement moves (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009). In addition, children and young people were interviewed to understand stigma related to living in foster care in London (Dansey et al., 2019). Findings from these studies involving children and young people living in out-of-home care settings enable understandings from their perspectives that would otherwise not be attained. However, the participation of marginalised or vulnerable stakeholder groups in evaluation presents challenges.

**Challenges of involving children in evaluation processes**

Challenges involving vulnerable stakeholders in evaluation processes frequently arise in relation to power asymmetries between stakeholder groups and the potential for
conflict (Baur et al., 2010). This is particularly true when working with children and young people. As Norris (2012) suggests, the language and format used to collect feedback needs to be unambiguous, culturally and age-appropriate (allowing for a shorter attention span and reliance on concrete operational thinking), and power or political imbalances need consideration.

Further challenges when involving children in evaluation include ensuring they are comfortable using the approach determined by the evaluator to provide feedback (Mişca, 2010; Wilson et al., 2010). In addition, the position of the evaluator should be considered. Is the evaluator staff from the organisation whom the child may trust, but who could then influence the feedback, or an independent evaluator whom the child may not know or trust? Independent evaluations can improve the credibility and reliability of findings (Gillingham, 2018), however, this can cause organisations to perceive evaluation to be a drain on resources (Carman & Fredericks, 2008).

These challenges are complex and can deter nonprofit organisations due to the time and resources needed to effectively implement and use evaluation. However, if these challenges are not addressed, they impede the successful development of an organisational culture where the voices of beneficiaries are valued and prioritised, and evaluation is used to its full potential (Carman & Fredericks, 2008; Mitchell & Berlan, 2016; Thayer, 2006). Failure to overcome the challenges reduces the ability to use evaluative thinking and practice to address inherent assumptions about programmes, and advance learning about a programme’s theory of change.

In summary, children have a right to be heard and involved in decisions that affect them, including providing an evaluation of educational programmes they are involved in. While previous research involving evaluation with children favours qualitative methods, survey design has also been used (Chapman et al., 2004; Sellers et al., 2020). Differing methods of enabling children to have a voice on matters affecting them elicit different responses but have been instrumental in gaining understandings of the children’s perspectives that would otherwise remain unknown and unheard.

**Conceptual framework underpinning the PJF evaluation instrument**

The evaluation instrument was initially informed by a literature review which gave rise to the underpinning conceptual framework. Here, Knight and Rossi (2018) identified factors influencing the Love of Learning Programme’s positive effect upon a child’s life. Of these factors, *Relational pedagogy* is central towards the programme’s success. Relational pedagogy was found to impact *resilience, school connectedness* and *learning confidence* (Knight & Rossi, 2018). These factors and their relationship to each other are explained.

*Relational pedagogy* involves the construction and maintenance of positive mentor–child relationships and situates learning and development firmly within a social context (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). Within relational pedagogy ‘... children’s positive development depends ... on whether the contexts in which they develop, including schools, are reliable sources of supportive relationships’ (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017, p. 86). Relational pedagogy embraces the importance of the relationship between child and
Pyjama Angel. The human-centred principles of relational pedagogy include engendering ‘creative action and collaborative knowledge production between students, educators and family members’ (Edwards, 2018, p. 256). This means that dialogue using relational pedagogy emphasises speaking *with* rather than *to* children and young people, to build trust and co-create positive and meaningful learning experiences.

*Academic resilience* concerns the increased likelihood of success, both in school and in life, despite environmental adversities (Wang et al., 1994). This is an important attribute for children in out-of-home care to develop as many frequently change schools and experience difficulties learning which has both academic and socio-emotional impacts (Skilling, 2018). Even for children who are not academically inclined, academic resilience can support them to persist at school and achieve their study or career goals (Neal, 2017).

*Learning confidence* relates to a child’s sense of self and self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to the child’s belief that they have the power to produce effects (Bandura et al., 2001). Self-efficacy is important for children in out-of-home care because it can increase their motivation to learn and helps them actively engage in school activities, which are indicators of *school connectedness* (Thompson et al., 2006).

These factors – relational pedagogy, academic resilience, learning confidence and school connectedness – were used to inform the design of the instrument. They are considered typically relevant to all children and young people in out-of-home care, regardless of their age, culture, learning abilities or challenges.

**Methodology**

*Developing the instrument*

Developing an evaluation instrument for children to use to evaluate the Love of Learning programme, that reflects the underpinning conceptual framework, presented complex design considerations. As Almqvist and Almqvist (2015) note, ‘researching with young children is challenging, in that the methods for collecting data are influenced by the children’s way of responding to them’ (p. 590). PJF wanted all children using the programme to have the opportunity to evaluate it. However, there are a large number of children geographically spread across Australia, making face-to-face focus group discussions or interviews with every child unviable. In addition, PJF relies on volunteers, thereby lacking organisational capacity to implement human intensive evaluation processes. The design also needed to be aligned with PJF’s relational and trauma-informed approach which supports the safety needs of children and foster carers. This recognises that evaluation does not sit external or separate to the programme but needs to be congruent with the theoretical approach espoused by the organisation.

To assist in deciding what type of instrument may be suitable at the pilot stage, two focus group discussions were held. The first focus group involved nine child development experts, from government, academia and practice. The second focus group involved 11 current and former foster carers and Pyjama Angels who understand the children’s needs and vocabulary. Each focus group was facilitated by the
lead researcher with a second researcher observing and taking notes and lasted approximately two hours. Focus group participants were asked about their views on how children might be engaged in providing feedback and what challenges needed to be considered.

As a result of the focus groups and in keeping with the Love of Learning Programme’s focus upon reading books to children, it was decided that a brief, hard-copy survey format would be designed to resemble a book. This would present a relatable and consistent format for the children. The book contained the survey questions with space to colour, add stickers and write their own feedback if the child wanted to. The goal was to make the survey a safe, interactive experience that felt enjoyable to complete. It would also mean the children could complete the survey at their own individual pace, taking regular breaks or reading the questions more than once before deciding on their response.

Focus group participants discussed the importance of foster carers understanding how and why the evaluation was being conducted. Foster carers would be given guidance about their role in the process depending on the child’s age, literacy level and maturity. Pyjama Angels would not be involved to ensure the process was free from coercion, showing respect, justice and beneficence for child participants (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018).

Developing the survey items

To develop survey items capable of measuring the following four factors: relational pedagogy, academic resilience, school connectedness and learning confidence, extant instruments within the literature were reviewed and informed how the questions were written. The survey items were designed for the statements to measure the Pyjama Angels’ impact on children’s development, reflecting input based on both theory and practice. For example, ‘The Children’s Hope Scale’ (Snyder et al., 1997) was drawn upon to help develop survey items capable of measuring academic resilience. In this regard, ‘The Children’s Hope Scale’ item: ‘When I have a problem, I can come up with lots of ways to solve it’ (Snyder et al., 1997, p. 419), informed the development of the item: My Pyjama Angel helps me feel like I can solve most problems if I try hard enough. An additional example is the use of ‘The School Connectedness Scale’ (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011, p. 88) item: ‘People I care about tell me that school is important’ informed the development of the item: My Pyjama Angel helps me think about how important school is for achieving my future goals.

Table 1 lists the final survey items and how they were grouped to develop potential measures for the constructs. The literature informed the creation of a 20-item questionnaire, with a five-point Likert-type scale rating with space for qualitative, open-ended responses. See Appendix 1 for page excerpts from the survey booklet. The survey was then tested to validate the internal consistency and reliability of the survey items. The data analysis revealed that the survey could be improved by removing one question from the items measuring Learning Confidence. Consequently, the survey was reduced to a 19-item instrument, measuring the four factors. Furthermore,
Table 1. Survey item development of the 19-item instrument.

| Factor                  | Item                                                                 | Literature used to inform the survey items                                      |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Relationship pedagogy   | When I read books or instructions, my Pyjama Angel encourages me to ask myself questions to understand what I am reading. | • Anderman et al. (2005);                                                       |
|                         | My Pyjama Angel encourages me to talk to myself in positive way.        | • Appleton et al. (2006);                                                        |
|                         | My Pyjama Angel helps me learn how to listen to my teachers.            | • Fredricks et al. (2005);                                                       |
|                         | My Pyjama Angel encourages me to care about my teacher’s opinion.       | • Gaumer Erickson et al. (2018);                                                 |
|                         | My Pyjama Angel helps me think about how important school is for achieving my future goals. | • Schwarzer & Jerusalem (1995);                                                  |
| School connectedness    | My Pyjama Angel encourages me to be a good learner.                     | • Lohmeier & Lee (2011);                                                        |
|                         | My Pyjama Angel encourages me to always try my best at school.          | • Snyder et al. (1997);                                                         |
|                         | My Pyjama Angel helps me improve at school.                            | • Williams & Deci (1996);                                                       |
| Academic resilience     | When I am confused about something I am learning, my Pyjama Angel helps me try and figure it out. | • Wolters et al. (2005)                                                         |
|                         | When I am working out a problem, my Pyjama Angel helps me to keep thinking until I think of a possible solution. |                                               |
|                         | My Pyjama Angel helps me feel like I can solve most problems if I try hard enough. |                                               |
|                         | My Pyjama Angel helps me understand what I am good at.                  |                                               |
|                         | My Pyjama Angel supports me.                                           |                                               |
|                         | My Pyjama Angel is interested in me and my goals.                       |                                               |
|                         | My Pyjama Angel wants me to do well at school.                         |                                               |
| Learning connectedness  | When I feel like quitting, my Pyjama Angel helps me find ways to solve the problem. |                                               |
|                         | My Pyjama Angel helps me to feel confident that I will achieve my goals.|                                               |
|                         | With help from my Pyjama Angel, I am doing pretty well at school.       |                                               |
|                         | My Pyjama Angel helps me to do well at school because school is important to me. |                                               |
correlational analyses revealed significant and positive correlations between the factors indicating their direct and beneficial associations.

**Making the instrument useful**

*Testing the survey – reflexive feedback from participants*

Through pilot implementation with a sample of children PJF can now ascertain the survey’s ability to engage children in out-of-home care in an evaluation process. Questions to explore are the following: Did the instrument support children to provide feedback? Did the feedback validate the theory of change? In addition, to encourage stakeholder participation, the pilot process has feedback opportunities with the children, foster carers and Pyjama Angels about the survey design and how foster carers support the process. Engaging children in the design process in this way acknowledges the importance of involving beneficiaries in the development of the evaluation instrument. It is important to record that the absence of children’s involvement in the original design process is currently a notable limitation of the instrument and a goal for the next stage of PJF’s evaluation design. Activating the children’s right to impact upon the instrument design would help to further their empowerment. Ensuring children have the opportunity to provide feedback on the instrument design enables a more reflexive process, acknowledged as being central within participatory approaches (Stafford, 2017).

Participatory evaluation (Greene, 1986) approaches seek to acknowledge and elevate the perspectives of the least powerful and most affected stakeholders (Cooper, 2014), improving the relevance and validity of evaluation findings (Brandon et al., 1993) and supporting aims of social justice, empowerment and emancipation through giving voice (Cooper, 2017; Mathison, 2018; Taut, 2008). If PJF have aims of moving the value of the children’s evaluation instrument beyond organisational learning and towards activating social justice principles, involving children in impacting the survey design is a logical next step in the development process. It is expected this will take the form of interviews with children involved in the pilot phase or focus group discussions. The emphasis at this stage is using the feedback provided to amend the instrument. Without an authentic application of the children’s input, any instrument risks becoming tokenistic and, as such, not providing a full and genuine reflection of the child’s view, an accurate evaluation of the Love of Learning Programme, or activating the child’s rights to be heard.

**Conclusion and contribution**

Children have a right to hold and express views in all matters affecting them, which includes their involvement in the educational programme provided by PJF. This article has presented processes undertaken to develop an evaluation instrument to be used by children involved in PJF’s Love of Learning Programme, based on both theory and practice. The intention of the evaluation instrument is to enable children to impact the
educational programme. For PJF, it is anticipated the children’s voices, heard through the evaluation instrument, will enable organisational learning and programme development. This educational learning and programme development will be relayed back to the Pyjama Angels to demonstrate to them how the children’s feedback is being used to improve the programme.

Hearing children’s views on programmes they participate in helps to develop safe spaces for children to engage, where their thoughts are valued and opinions matter. As such, this article advocates for evaluation practices that value children’s voices and provides a case study of a nonprofit organisation navigating the challenges and risks to achieve this goal. In addition, this research contributes to evaluation literature through its conceptual framework and survey instrument design for mentoring and educational programmes that foreground relational pedagogy.

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**Appendix 1.** Excerpts from the developed survey booklet.

![Image of survey booklet](image-url)