

Realist Evaluation case study: Evaluation of Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Community Outreach Programme

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Realist Evaluation

Impact Evaluation with Small Cohorts: [Methodological Guidance \(p. 27-31\)](#)

Case Study

This Realist Evaluation was conducted as part of a TASO programme to pilot the use of a series of small n methodologies within widening participation (WP). The nature of Realist Evaluation approaches means that there is no single 'correct' way of applying this methodology. The example presented here should be considered as illustrative of the approach rather than as a definitive model.

Methodological Guidance

Impact Evaluation with Small Cohorts: Methodological Guidance (29–33)

Realist Evaluation case study: University Centre Leeds GRT Community Outreach Programme

Programme overview

Programme Context

University Centre Leeds (UCL) is a provider of HE qualifications from foundation degrees to higher apprenticeships.

The programme was developed as part of a pre-existing Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) girl's group. It comprises six session blocks of activity embedded into established group meetings at a GRT community centre.

The programme sessions were developed in collaboration with key stakeholders, including the community organisation staff and the GRT young people participating. The six-session block began with a stakeholder engagement session, followed by the co-design of the subsequent sessions in collaboration with participants.

The ultimate objective of the community outreach intervention is to challenge the education inequality faced by GRT young people and their under-representation in FE and HE.

Evaluation Context

The programme team wanted to understand the effectiveness of the programme delivery approach, which embedded a dedicated Outreach Officer to deliver the programme in a community setting.

The team chose to use a realist evaluation approach after consulting Befani's (2020) tool, which is designed to help evaluators to select appropriate methodologies. They were particularly interested in understanding how the different programme activities cause or contribute to outcomes and impacts.

Realist evaluation approaches tend to be methodologically agnostic, drawing on a range of evaluation tools as deemed appropriate. As such, and in contrast to some of the other small cohort evaluation approaches, there is no prescribed set of steps or methodology to deliver outcomes. A realist approach tends to be characterised by an interest in how the context of the intervention and the change mechanism work together to deliver outcomes. Realist evaluations are often dominated by the search for CMO configurations, and detailed models of how change comes about.

Evaluation questions:

1. What difference did the GRT outreach programme make to the group(s) and under what circumstances?
2. How and why did the GRT outreach programme make a difference to the participants' attitudes and aspirations, if any?
3. What other factors/circumstances need to be present alongside the GRT outreach programme to produce the observed outcomes and increase the chances of effectiveness?

Theory of Change development

The first stage in this evaluation process was to develop a Theory of Change by mapping out what is known or assumed about how the programme delivers its outcomes.

The initial Theory of Change was based on a logic model which mapped the aims, activities, outputs and outcomes. It was developed by the project team and based on their previous experience of working with GRT young people, empirical research, and local research with GRT communities (e.g., Greenfields et al., 2021).

Engaging with realist evaluation encouraged the project team to begin separating the programme into a series of separate programme theories, detailing how specific programme elements worked.

This resulted in a series of three 'programme theories', models which explain how this combination of context and mechanism leads to specific outcomes. Each programme theory was evidence-informed by empirical research and a review of relevant literature:

1. The programme builds trust between GRT communities and education providers.
2. Appropriately targeted project activities will engage GRT young people and enable them to consider FE and HE options and opportunities.
3. Engaging in the programme will support the Project Officer in developing knowledge and understanding of GRT young people, which can then be used to support other work for this group.

As the Theory of Change developed, the programme team recognised that there were two separate streams of activity, two of which focused on outcomes for participants, the other for programme delivery practitioners (programme theory 3).

Developing Context, Mechanism, and Outcome models (CMO configurations)

A realist evaluation approach brings together a consideration of the change mechanism (M), the context (C) in which it works, and the outcome (O) it delivers.

These three elements are interrelated in realist approaches.

The project team considered the wide range of contexts and circumstances in which programme change mechanisms could be expected to work to deliver anticipated outcomes. The theorising of these contexts was informed by the previous experience of the delivery team working with GRT young people, community representatives, involvement in multi-sector forums, academic literature and evaluation evidence.

The programme team developed several CMO models. For illustration, we focus on two models here. Detail about other CMO models is available in the UCL Report.

Context can include a wide range of factors including, but not limited to, economic, geographic, historical and political circumstances, material resources, social structures, or participants' cultural values and experiences. The context of an intervention can cause or prevent a mechanism from working as expected. Dalkin et al (2015) provide a useful discussion of how context and mechanism concepts might be used in realist evaluation. They suggest that 'mechanisms will only activate in the right conditions, providing a context + mechanism=outcome formula as a guiding principle to realist enquiry' (3).

The **mechanism** is the element of the intervention that acts to cause the desired changes when facilitated by the context.

The **outcome** is what happens as a result of the change mechanism happening in the context identified.

Context:

Engaging with GRT young people in their community setting (this helps build trust, and confidence and encourages their engagement in the programme).



Mechanism:

Co-creating activity programme with participations (reflects their interest and cultural capital and increases engagement).



Outcome:

GRT participants engage with programme, develop confidence and trust in the programme team, and develop sense of agency.

Context:

Participants are engaged and enthusiastic about the programme and programme content.



Mechanism:

The programme content and design is culturally relevant and engages participant interests.



Outcome:

Participants engage with IAG and other activities about FE and HE options and opportunities.

Outcomes were divided into immediate, short- and long-term timescales. The outcomes shown above focus on the immediate and short-term timeframes. The project team suggested that the outcomes of different CMO models interacted and reinforced each other. Thus, increased participant engagement with and trust in their programme translated into an openness towards new experiences, which in turn resulted in participants being more likely to engage in IAG and discussions about HE and FE opportunities.

Revisit Theory of Change

The next stage in Realist Evaluation often consists of developing and refining the CMO models through an additional round of data collection.

The initial draft of the Theory of Change relied on the concept of 'confidence'. As the different CMO models developed, the project team developed new understanding and knowledge about the interaction of context, mechanisms and outcomes within programme deliverables.

This made it possible for the team to replace this broad, vague and hard-to-measure construct with a series of more detailed and bounded constructs. 'Confidence' was translated into knowledge, openness, and empowerment.

Additional and focused literature reviews and development of the evidence base reinforced the team's thinking about their CMO models and enabled them to develop a more robust description of how they worked.

The initial Theory of Change was replaced by a more detailed and refined model that showed how the different CMOs interacted.

Evaluation outcomes

The evaluation outcomes of this project consist primarily of a series of knowledge gains about the target group of GRT young people and how they can be reached and engaged by programme delivery teams. Key learning included:

- The creation of a 'safe' and co-creative space increases participant engagement.
- Ensuring programmes reflect the interests and cultural capital of participants increases trust and therefore engagement.
- Consistent engagement with the programme increases its impact on individual participants.
- The development of a positive relationship between the programme provider, participants and community representatives increases the likelihood of successful project outcomes.
- Participants who continued into the following year of the programme can support the engagement of new participants.

For a more expansive list of project outcomes, see the UCL local evaluation report.

Adaptions to the methodology

Because Realist Evaluation tends not to be prescriptive, the project team felt able to be flexible in the way they approached evaluation data collection and analysis. No adaptation to their context was therefore seen as necessary. The core element that informed their evaluation approach was the primary focus on context, methodology and outcome.

Reflections from using the Realist Evaluation methodology

The project team reflected that the experience of implementing realist evaluation helped clarify the programme impact.

The team's early reflections included feelings of imposter syndrome, apprehension, and anxiety about how realist evaluation could and should be implemented in their operational context. They suggest that this was exacerbated by a lack of existing case studies relevant to their

operational context.

The team observed that substantial time and resource was required to fully understand realist evaluation as a methodology, how it could be implemented in a small cohort study and how it could be used in the context of their GRT community outreach. In particular, the team had to work out how to produce thorough and high-level theories as part of the Theory of Change development process.

The team advise that other project teams engaging in this approach allocate sufficient time for background reading and developing their Theory of Change. The empirical research carried out in the early stages of the Theory of Change development can be also key to success, meaningful evaluation, and effective evaluation implementation.

The project team concluded that realist evaluation has provided real benefits in helping them understand the outcomes and success of their intervention for very specific underrepresented groups, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people, and for small cohorts. A realist evaluation approach helped them describe the 'whys' and 'hows' of their programme and to identify and measure immediate and/or shorter-term outcomes. At the same time, realist evaluation reveals the importance of context for these groups and the importance of considering this when designing, developing and implementing interventions.

Conclusions

Ultimately, the team reflected that while they found the process of conducting a realist evaluation 'very motivating and aspirational', it also revealed the substantial resources required. This was exacerbated by the small size of the team and this might limit their ability to use it in future projects.

They conclude that realist evaluation is a highly effective methodology for small cohort evaluations, but smaller institutions, with small teams or no evaluation teams in many cases, may find it necessary to make a strategic decision about when and where to implement it because of the resources required.

References

Dalkin, S.M., Greenhalgh, J., Jones, D., Cunningham, B. and Lhussier, M., 2015. What's in a mechanism? Development of a key concept in realist evaluation. *Implementation science*, 10(1), pp.1-7.