# Got Data? Interrogating "Evidence-Based" Decision-Making

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Why should we care about program decision making?

▶ Multiple levels of decision making should interest evaluators

 ▶ Decisions made between becoming aware of a problem and choosing a solution

 ▶ Decisions made during the determination of outcomes or indicators of success

 ▶ Decisions made during program implementation
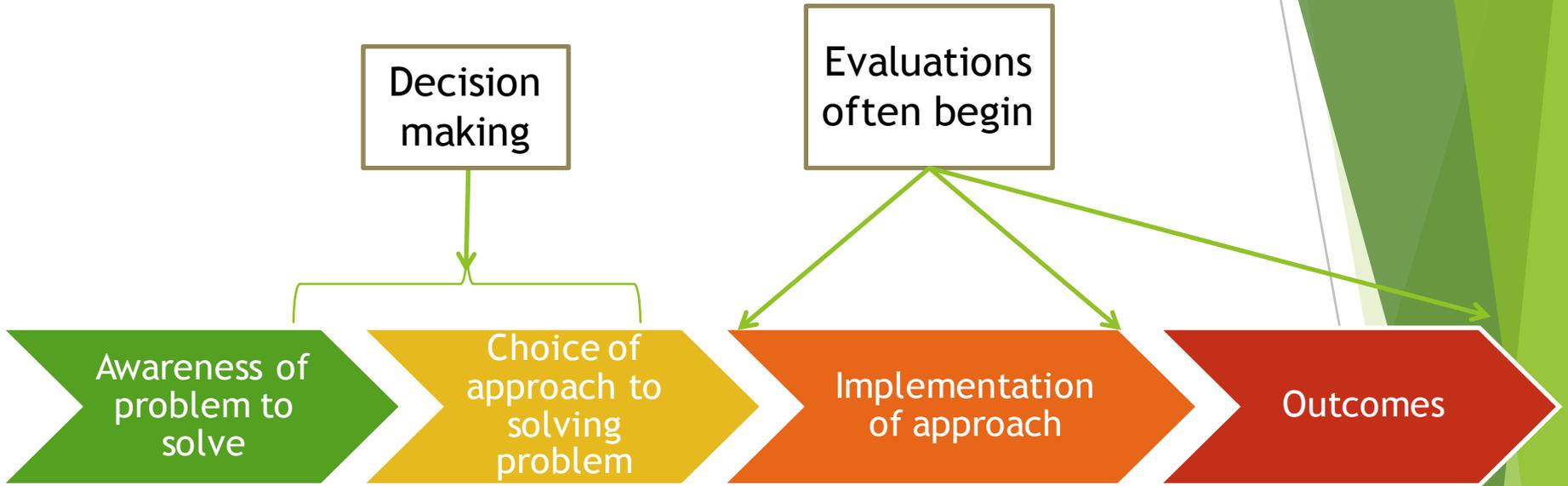
Setting the context: Why should evaluators care about program decision making?

- In education, federal pressure to use evidence to drive decisions:

  - ESSA Non-Regulatory Guidance – "evidence" appears 115 times

    - *Four evidence levels*

    - *Steps for enhancing effectiveness of investments include (1) Identifying local needs; (2) selecting relevant, evidence-based interventions; (3) planning for implementation; (4) implementation; and (5) examine and reflect*

Setting the context: Why should evaluators care about program decision making?

▶ Analogues in nursing and healthcare: reduce variability by increasing evidence-based practice

▶ Nursing Guidelines in the Star Model

  ▶ *(1) discovery; (2) evidence summary; (3) translation into guidelines; (4) integration into practice; and (5) evaluation of process and outcome*

Why should evaluators care about program decision making?

▶ Much decision-making is invisible to evaluators

▶ Could earlier access to decision-makers or increased knowledge (even retrospective) of their decisions:

     ▶ …improve evaluation practice?

     ▶ …enhance evaluation use?

Why should evaluators care about program decision making?

- Using evidence for decision-making can be difficult and is rarely straightforward:
  - Educators struggle to articulate the rationale behind their decisions
  - Difference between data-driven decisions and decisions grounded in "data literacy" – often unsure how to include multiple sources of evidence in decision-making

On what grounds are decisions made?

- Characteristics of the setting
- Physical features and resources available
- Climate
- Interpersonal dynamics
- Political context

Chars of the setting
Physical features &
available resources
Climate
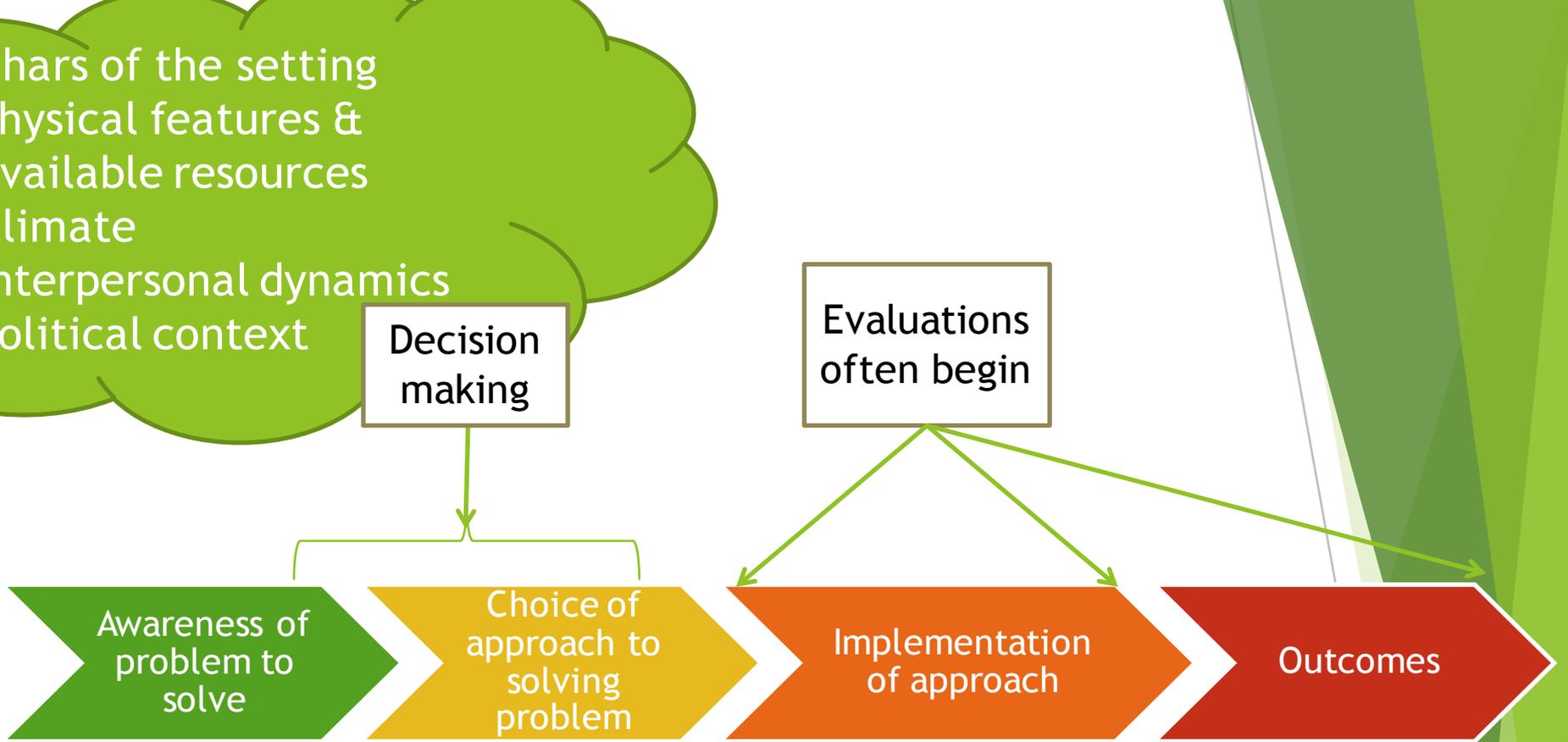Interpersonal dynamics
Political context

Decision making

Evaluations often begin

| Awareness of problem to solve | Choice of approach to solving problem | Implementation of approach | Outcomes |

Decision-Making Frameworks

- Many factors play into decisions

- Are there ways to help practitioners improve or refine their decision-making?

  - Rules of thumb (collect needs data, don't jump to conclusions)

  - Improvement science approach

- Variety of descriptive frameworks in which decision-making = individual(s) choosing between n alternatives

  - Examining predominant types of decision-making can be informative to evaluators

    - Logical empirical

    - Normative affective

Decision-Making Frameworks

Type	Questions asked	Type(s) of rationality	Process
Logical-empirical	What's the most efficient (effective) means to an end?	Reason Analytical rationality Instrumental rationality	(1) Identify the problem; (2) generate alt solutions; (3) select solution that is most logical that has desired effect; (4) implement and evaluate solution Follow rules or satisfice
Normative-affective	What is the right choice? Where are we going? Is this development desirable?	Prudence and practical wisdom – goal is to make the "right" choice	Use experience to recognize patterns: "feel for the game" or habitus (Bourdieu); determine course of action they think will work (intuitive)

Illustrative Examples

- Surveys of education decision-makers
- Semi-structured conversations: school district leader and school principal

Collecting information about client decision making—surveys and interviews

▶ What is one "problem of practice" you faced this past year?

▶ How did you go about identifying or defining that problem of practice?

▶ How did you determine or decide on a course of action to confront that problem? What factors influenced your decision(s)? Who did you consult?

Collecting information about client decision making—surveys and interviews

▶ How did goals play into the decision about a course of action?

▶ How did values play into the decision about a course of action?

Collecting information about client decision making—surveys and interviews

- How did you determine the most important markers (or criteria) of success relative to confronting or addressing the problem of practice? How were these criteria communicated?

- If you learned that your decision is not leading to the desired results, did you decide on a different course of action? If so, what other factors did you consider? Who else did you consult?

Illustrative Example – Education Decision-Makers (Surveys)

- In some cases, respondents noted that decision-making adhered to a formal process wherein particular data points were reviewed (pre- data, research evidence, perspectives of identified stakeholders)

- In other cases, decision-making processes for a particular problem of practice varied, depending on the point of entry

Illustrative Example – Education Decision-Makers (Surveys)

▶ In most cases, survey respondents described decision-making as distributed, with key stakeholders invited to provide input

  ▶ Multiple meetings with different stakeholders

  ▶ Key questions and possible solutions provided for feedback

  ▶ Observation and listening sessions

  ▶ Sometimes, not often, program recipients consulted (students, parents)

Illustrative Example – Education Decision-Makers (Surveys)

- Largely unquestioned, goals and values that were referenced in the responses existed as part of the systems or the interventions being implemented
  - Problematic for some respondents—intervention values did not correspond to the values of the school (principal's decision about the program guided by his/her normative commitments to students)

Illustrative Example – Education Decision-Makers (Surveys)

▶ Criteria of success defined in terms of whether addressing the initial problem of practice (educator compliance, student attendance)

▶ Recognition of the importance of tracking implementation to determine alternative courses of action; determining next steps can be facilitated by external agent

Illustrative Example – School Principal (Interview)

- Data highlighted need to rethink school calendar (quarter, trimester, semester)

- Distributed decision making on small scale

- Decision based on "trimester break is particularly difficult for them; they face difficult scenarios at home" and semesters providing a "safety net"

Illustrative Example – School District Leader (Interview)

- Decision-making focused on internal politics and adhering to process
  - Problem identification highly formalized process in designated spaces
  - Decisions grounded in bureaucratic or political bargaining
- District leadership identifies problems
  - Using a prescribed protocol in scheduled meetings
  - Through business-style continuous improvement teams
- Decisions primarily involve consensus among senior leadership
- Indicators of success based on formal charter

Preliminary Findings

▶ Decision-making falls along a continuum from logical-empirical to normative-affective

▶ Some aspects of the decision-making present as logical empirical whereas others are clearly normative affective … these can be combined for a single decision

▶ Decision-makers all used some form of data to identify problems

▶ Goals & values largely unquestioned … evaluators can facilitate conversation about alignment with needs

Preliminary Findings

- Eliciting information on the pressures and concerns of decision-makers can inform next steps
  - Individuals in more political positions tend to rely on rule-bound decision-making—less likely to describe influence of personal commitments
  - Individuals closer to those impacted by decisions relied more on normative commitments

What can we do with this information?

- Condition client's decision-making?
  - Are there other ways to think about the problem?
  - Are there other voices that should have been included?
  - How to balance accountability requirements with serving others' needs?
  - How well do the problems of practice align with selected programs and anticipated outcomes?
  - Are program selection decisions justified? Will they meet federal or other requirements?

What can we do with this information?

- Instrumental uses
    - Examine alignment among problems of practice, selected programs, and anticipated outcomes
    - Frame or reframe evaluation plans
    - Determine how to share findings with clients and program beneficiaries
    - Evaluation practice may improve—better knowledge of the program and politics = more responsive and useful
- Conceptual use
    - Improve clients' evaluation literacy