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Community Action Research: Providing Evidence of Value and Virtue

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Using a community action research approach, the Early Learning Initiative (ELI) provides an integrated programme of educational support from early years up to third level with over 2,500 children, parents and professionals actively involved each year. An independent evaluation by the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin found that ELI's cross sectorial networks were working effectively to enhance educational outcomes for children and their families. ELI had made an impact on the home learning environment with learning being perceived as enjoyable and something to be shared across the family. Children and young people were faring well in terms of educational outcomes and in their attitudes to education.

Where does action research sit in relation to independent scientific evaluation and/or evidenced-based programmes? Independent 'scientific' evaluations may be useful in endorsing programmes and highlighting future directions but they do not provide the process or on-going data required for continuous improvement and community building. They also do not develop the capacity, ownership and participation required for implementation.

Community action research gives a genuine voice to participants through a methodology that directly involves them as co-constructors of programmes. It supports the implementation of change in a way that enhances participants' capabilities, both individually and collectively, to produce results they truly care about. This empowering approach needs to acquire the recognition and prestige of other methodologies.

This paper will share how ELI collects and uses data to develop a learning community, improve learning, manage change, influence national policy, secure funding and tell our story to others. A disciplined strategy to both the collection and use of data is required to evidence impact and highlight successes. In today's economic climate, with the focus on producing 'evidence' and 'outcomes', this is both a challenge and an opportunity.