

*What curriculum reforms are introduced
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Appraising Curriculum Reform

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AN APPEALING and frequently used strategy for appraising educational outcomes is to rely upon the performance of students on achievement tests. Such a procedure is reasonably sound if the content of the curriculum has remained uniform, but when curriculum reform consists of the replacement of one program by another with different content, the strategy is ineffective.

Content-oriented achievement tests cannot evaluate the performance of students studying different material. To overcome this problem of differences in course content, a popular procedure is to strike an artificial dichotomy between basic skills and knowledge. When there are widely agreed upon educational objectives, the identification and evaluation of the basic skills may be operationally feasible.

Despite the apparent narrowness of an assessment with a basic skills test, there is some theoretical justification for the procedure. In effective instructional programs the aptitude or developmental growth of children is enhanced. Abilities to perform are developed so that learning proceeds at a more rapid pace. Consequently, assessing the development of basic skills should provide a comprehensive evaluation of program effectiveness.

In contrast, hostility toward school and the stifling of educational development may be a direct correlate of poor instructional programs and inadequate curriculums. The consequence of the school hostility and stunted growth will be manifested in a lowered performance in basic skills.

The justification for tests of basic skills, while warranted, does not apply to standardized testing programs as they are usually constituted. These standardized tests have remained popular partly because they are widely promoted by test publishers as the appropriate means of appraisal and partly because they are readily available.

Probably the major reason for the continued popularity of standardized tests

is that schools blissfully assume that these tests answer important educational questions that cannot be answered with less elaborate procedures. I will try to demonstrate that schools could adopt much more efficacious and efficient procedures if they could bring themselves to break with the massive standardized testing programs and with the concomitant elaborate norming and record-keeping paraphernalia.

Curriculum Appraisal and National Norms

One bench mark for establishing curriculum effectiveness is to compare performance to a national norm. Even if intelligence- and age-equated norms were available, the national norm would provide a limited assessment of curriculum; for a below average performance may be attributable to: (a) a cultural deficit or language barrier; (b) culturally biased or curriculum biased tests; or (c) poor instruction. A further difficulty is that national norms do not provide any guidelines for the level of performance described by a percentile or by a grade placement. One cannot prescribe an appropriate instructional program for a child by observing that his national norm percentile is 20.

A second and critical problem is that national norms do not provide expectancies for future performance. For example, in the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the fifth percentile on the Composite (Total) score is listed at grade three as about one year behind in grade placement, that is, 5 percent of third-grade children have learned only as much as average second-grade children. At grade nine the fifth percentile is slightly over two years behind.¹ These norms have apparently been misinterpreted to mean that low-performing, and presumably below-average-ability children make almost normal progress in school. This is an incorrect interpretation. These norms do not describe the expected performance for a child starting a year behind in grade three.

What Performance Is Expected?

Recently some people have been shocked to discover that an accumulated educational deficit exists among inner-city children. Apparently they believed that norms of the type cited provided expectancies for performance.

No norm could establish realistic expectancies. The expectancy must be based upon the kind of student being taught and the kind of educational program available. A low-performing child in reading, for example, should be diagnosed as a disabled reader. The prognosis should be that the child will continue to be a disabled reader until a program is available that teaches him to read.

Expectancies should be based, not on norms, but on program teaching strategies. Expectancies should differentiate between an average gain for an entire group and individual gains for specific pupils. Some curriculums or instructional programs may be very effective for a group as a whole and still fail to meet learning problems of individual students. Appraising curriculums by evaluating

¹ Iowa Test of Basic Skills. *Teachers Manual*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1955-56. pp. 42-48.

normative gain on standardized tests perhaps has popular appeal, but has little scientific validity.

New York City as an Example

Recently New York City third-grade children were reported to be a year below grade level in reading. The information may be of value although a small representative sample rather than a city-wide testing program would have obtained the same result. What can one say about the curriculum and instructional program in New York City, given the information that there is below average performance? There is no way to determine whether the curriculum is excellent or abominable. It is possible that New York City has an excellent curriculum and highly effective instruction, but the unique problems of bilingual or cultural-handicapped children result in lowered performance.

To appraise the curriculum adequately, one must be able to describe the possibilities of teaching each child. Information about each child's language and cultural handicaps would be helpful but insufficient. If large numbers of children have developed school hostility or have become defensive toward reading because of frustrating failures, the prognosis for successfully teaching these children would be lowered. Evaluation of a program must take account of the educational problems to be coped with. Programs must also be examined to see what kinds of problems they create.

Additional Appraisal Problems

Curriculum reform sometimes stems from a realization that some particular knowledge, skill, or procedure should be learned. Examples might be the decomposition method in subtraction, Venn diagrams in modern math, or wave mechanics in physics. Curriculum evaluation always involves at least a two-pronged assessment. One must ascertain the value of the curriculum material and one must determine how effectively the material has been learned.

The criteria for deciding what material should be incorporated into a curriculum are complex. Evaluating whether the decision was a wise one is even more complex. The evaluation could be based upon later performance of students, how effectively they read, what marks they later obtain in secondary schools, or whether they become competent mathematicians.

The problem of determining what students have learned will soon be greatly simplified, because several test publishers are developing procedures to market custom-made tests. Schools will be able to order achievement tests that meet their own subject matter content specifications. Such tests will be fraught with all of the imprecision of basic skills tests. They will, however, provide an index of what has been learned and thus indirectly what has been taught. When the decision is made as to what to teach, teachers can judge how effectively they teach it. A concomitant benefit of such a system, when computerized, will be to know the variety of things taught in the nation and the effectiveness of the teaching.

Educators have long been aware that, in the process of learning useful skills, some students might develop attitudes toward a skill or toward learning that would block their future development and use of the skill. Judgments of curriculum adequacy should certainly consider the extent of development of unfavorable attitudes. Some simple projective tests, such as drawing a picture of teacher, have been used to obtain indices of unfavorable school attitudes, but curriculums have not been evaluated by systematically studying their relationship to the development of school hostility. Tests of academic motivation might be suitable for such purposes, although they are not adequately developed at early grade levels.²

Evaluative criteria for educational outcomes are ultimately based on societal goals. What curriculum reforms are introduced and the criteria for judging them will depend upon forces and decisions that go far beyond the immediate concern of the schools. The societal goal may require more rocket engineers, more shock troops, and fewer dissenters. Hopefully it will require the development of more self-reliant people who can devise strategies for living in a world fraught with hostility. ❁

² John A. Finger Jr. and Morton Silverman. "Changes in Academic Performance in the Junior High School." *Personnel and Guidance Journal* 45 (2):157-64; October 1966.

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