

# Teacher Evaluation That Makes a Difference



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**H**OW to evaluate in education is one of our big, unanswered questions. Not that answers have not been given; they have been—hundreds of them. Most of these, however, are but partial answers, and many of them grossly oversimplify the questions. This is particularly true of those which apply to teacher evaluation.

A major difficulty in teacher evaluation is that we have not been able to get together on *what* we should be evaluating. Indeed, we do not even seem to be able to agree on *why* we evaluate teachers. With these two strikes against us, it is small wonder that we cannot achieve any consensus on *how* teachers should be evaluated. Whereas the variety of opinions on these matters is interesting, it is also confusing to practitioners in the field. The thesis proposed in this paper is that most efforts at teacher evaluation are far too narrowly focused, too oversimplified; consequently they omit important factors that are critical in improvement of teaching.

## What Purposes?

There will be small argument, if any, that the purpose for which evaluation is undertaken will strongly influence what we decide to evaluate, and how we go about evaluating it. The purposes for which we evaluate teachers are manifold. Generally,

we can divide the purposes of teacher evaluation into two categories: administrative and instructional. Each of these includes sub-categories. For example, administrative evaluation may be undertaken to decide whether or not a teacher will be employed for the next year, or whether he will be placed on tenure.

Many school systems have evaluated teachers to make decisions about what their salaries will be for the following year. These are so-called merit salary plans, which have almost always turned out to be unsatisfactory. Sometimes evaluations are used to make decisions about teacher transfers or promotions. All these are examples of evaluations for primarily *administrative* purposes; they are designed to gather information which is likely to help administrators to make administrative decisions. Some administrative evaluation is necessary, of course, and continually greater emphasis is being placed upon it because of the current growing emphasis on accountability.

Quite different, although closely related, is *instructional* evaluation, that which has as its primary purpose the improvement of the teaching and learning program. Of

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course, we can all think of instances in which firing a teacher (or even a principal, for that matter!) would help greatly in that respect. What is referred to here, however, is evaluation that is done with the hope that somehow it will result in better teaching and learning or, to broaden it out a little, better education. It is on this that we shall "zero in" for the remainder of this paper.

## Four Views on Evaluation

There are at least four views of how evaluation can bring about educational improvement. First, there is the view that the very fact that teachers are evaluated motivates them to do a better job. There is, perhaps, a modicum of truth in this. Most human beings need a little goading, a little pressure, a little urging to exert themselves to perform more than adequately.

The fact that a teacher will be graded "excellent," "satisfactory," or "poor," however, will work no magic in this respect. For a teacher to change or improve, he needs to know how to change, to know what the changed teaching behavior looks like, to know what he is doing that is less than satisfactory, and what would be better. Just to be evaluated will not in itself provide the teacher with this help.

Second, therefore, are those who believe that evaluation should be for the purpose of helping the supervisor to teach the teacher how to teach better. Again, there is some validity in this. It is particularly applicable in the case of new teachers who need help in basic techniques of classroom management and in adjusting to a new situation. For most veteran teachers, however, this concept of evaluation tends to lack validity. It is becoming progressively less valid as the curriculum becomes more complex and sophisticated, and as programs of teacher preparation improve.

Most veteran teachers probably know more about what they teach, and about how to teach at the age level of the pupils they teach, than do most of their principals or supervisors. Few principals can at the same time know how to help a primary grade

teacher with the newer methods of reading, and the fifth grade teacher with the new math or the "process curriculum" in science. Even in such basic matters as classroom control and management, most principals know that they have veteran teachers on their staffs who could teach them a thing or two. The didactic approach to evaluation may have had validity in the days when most teachers had little more than a "high school normal" training course; even today it may be useful with very new or very poor teachers, but it is not the main road to better education.

A third viewpoint is that the purpose of evaluation should be to stimulate the teacher's own self-evaluation of his functioning. This, too, has some validity; more, probably, than the other two viewpoints. It has the virtue of recognizing that nobody but the teacher can improve or change himself. Others may help him to change, encourage him to change, even bring force to bear on him to change. Yet whatever change takes place in a teacher is of his own doing. It has to take place inside him, and will take place only when *he* decides it is important to change, when *he* perceives a need for change, and when *he* understands with some clarity what the nature of the change ought to be.

## Recapitulation

Whereas all three of the foregoing conceptions include a part of "the truth," all three founder on the same fallacy: the belief that all that needs to be changed is the teacher. The quality of children's learning experiences depends only in part on the teacher. True, this may be the most important part, but it is still only a part, and that part depends upon and is strongly influenced by other factors.

The problem has some parallel with that of "improving" minority group children in the slums. These children are the product of their situation, and until the *situation* (including the schools, of course) is changed in important ways, those children's perceptions, values, and behaviors will not change very much. Less clearly, but nevertheless truly, the quality of children's classroom experi-

ences depends not only upon the teacher, important as he is, but on the entire teaching-learning situation.

Let us summarize what has been said about different kinds of evaluation. If we accept the proposition that the most important purpose of evaluation is improvement of the quality of the learning experiences of children, we can place conceptions of evaluation in an ascending order of probable effectiveness.

First, there is evaluation which simply judges whether a teacher is good, bad, or indifferent, and leaves it at that. This is the least effective form of evaluation for improving instruction.

Second, we have the conception of evaluation as supervisory analysis of a teacher's strengths and weaknesses, which enables the supervisor to teach the teacher how to teach better. This has some validity at the level of simple classroom management skills and certain relatively simple teaching techniques.

Third, there are those who maintain that our answer is to get teachers to engage in rigorous self-evaluation, since only the teacher can change himself. This is true as far as it goes, but it goes not far enough. The teacher is only one of the factors which determine the quality and variety of the educational experiences children will have.

Fourth, and this is my thesis, evaluation which has as its objective the improvement of the quality of children's learning experiences should be a cooperative study of the entire teaching and learning situation. This includes the teacher, of course. Yet it also includes the children; the facilities; the materials available; the nature of the community and its implications for children's curriculum experiences; the conception of education held by the principal and his staff; the pupil evaluation, marking, and reporting practices used; the time schedule; the climate of operation and expectations developed within the school by the principal and his staff; and other factors which bear importantly on the problem of providing opportunities for worthwhile learning experiences for children. It is conceivable, for example, that to improve the quality of the educational experiences of

the children in the East Bottomley School, the most important change needed is a change in the principal's conception of what good education is. This means, of course, that the principal of the East Bottomley School will have to engage in some self-evaluation himself.

## Characteristics of a Good Program

Within the framework of this point of view, what are the characteristics of a good program of evaluation? Let us propose a list of questions that suggest what the program should be like.

1. *Is the evaluation program cooperative?* That is, do administrative and supervisory personnel work both with individual teachers in cooperative study of individual classroom learning situations, and with groups of teachers, working in grade level or problem-centered groups? The emphasis here is on cooperative study rather than on unilateral, one-way evaluation.

2. *Is evaluation focused on the situation, not the teacher alone?* Are administrative procedures, expectations, and attitudes examined for the degree to which they help or hinder variety, experimentation, and the quality of the learning experiences teachers help children to have? Are the adequacy, variety, suitability, and accessibility of instructional materials appraised? Is the relevance of the curriculum to the nature and needs of these particular pupils carefully examined? Is the school and classroom arrangement flexible, cheerful, interesting? Is the teachers' classroom behavior warm and friendly, orderly and well-planned, sprightly and interesting? In other words, are we putting only the teacher under the magnifying glass, or are we studying a variety of the factors which influence or determine the quality of the children's learning experiences?

3. *Is the evaluation diagnostic rather than judgmental?* Do we concentrate on finding out what elements of the situation are causing problems, restricting progress, encouraging or inhibiting experimentation and

creativity, contributing to effectiveness, and why? Or do we content ourselves (as we too often do) with making a judgment, and letting it go at that?

4. *Does the process employed help the teacher and the principal (or other supervisor) maintain and build personal and professional self-respect and self-image, as well as respect for each other?* Too often the process has demeaned and humiliated the teacher, affronting his professional respect and dignity. If we wish to develop the image of teaching as a profession, we have to treat teachers as professionals—as fellow professionals, if you will. Indeed, the advent of collective negotiations bids fair to leave administrative and supervisory personnel little choice in this. We shall have to treat teachers as fellow professionals, or else. A better reason, however, is that it is psychologically the soundest way to achieve better education.

5. *Does the process foster self-evaluation on the part of all involved?* If we study all the elements in the situation, that must include ourselves. Unless we evaluate ourselves, and the manner in which we influence the situation for good or for ill, we shall not achieve self-improvement. This applies to principals and supervisors as well as to teachers. Of course, those who are perfect can ignore this one.

6. *Does the nature of the evaluation encourage experimentation, creativity, variation?* A program that evaluates the teachers on the degree to which they conform to someone else's conception of what good teaching is, will not be likely to encourage teachers to try new approaches. A premium will be placed on playing it safe.

7. *Does the evaluation program result in a higher quality and greater variety of opportunities for learning experiences for children in the classroom?* This, of course, is the payoff. Unless the evaluation program makes a difference in the classroom, we may very well question whether it is justified at all. The ultimate test of the evaluation is simply this: does it make a difference that is good?

## Some Necessary Considerations

The multitude of studies that have been made of teacher evaluation leave no question that the principal is the key person in the program. It is the rare school system where the principal is not the person most responsible for teacher evaluation. It follows, then, that principals are the people on whom the quality, the nature, and the effectiveness of the evaluation program depend most. More than any other group, it is in their power to improve evaluation programs.

Yet they cannot do this alone, any more than can a teacher. As with teachers, principals are but a part of an educational context. Role expectations of the central office authorities, for example, either severely hamper, or can facilitate, principals' or supervisors' efforts to develop effective cooperative plans and procedures of evaluation. Furthermore, the approach advocated here calls for expenditures of time and effort on the part of teachers. This requires both commitment on the part of teachers, and administrative recognition that the activities called for by such a conception of evaluation are properly to be considered a part of the teaching day.

Accountability is the current "in" word. Increasingly—and not unreasonably—educators are being asked to account for their stewardship. If handled well, this can have a most salubrious effect on the educational establishment. However, in our sudden efforts to mollify the public, let us be certain we do not oversimplify the problem; we have had enough of that.

Let us not fall into the old, old trap that it must be the teachers, alone, who shall be accountable, that they shall be the scapegoats for the shortcomings of the system, whatever those may be. Let us keep our vision wide-angled, and make certain that we appraise the influence of all factors that shape the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process in the schools, and the results which that process achieves. If we do, it is just conceivable that in the course of rendering our accountability, we may also substantially improve the learning experiences of the children in the schools. □

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