

The Ethics of Curriculum Evaluation

Robert L. Green

Curriculum evaluation studies seldom address the questions suggested by this author as being of critical importance: equality of educational opportunity and availability of learning opportunities. "Unless these shortcomings are acknowledged and dealt with, it is difficult to place confidence in the ethical quality of curriculum evaluation."

The ethical questions surrounding current practices in curriculum evaluation are the same questions that are basic to American education today. The first is whether we can allow children from low-income and racial minority families to continue to be separated from the more economically privileged white children and offered inferior educational opportunities. The second is whether we can allow children from all groups to continue to leave our educational institutions having failed to learn respect for human rights and dignity.

To date, over 1,600 court cases have addressed the first question without apparent resolution. I can say, after testifying in over a dozen

school desegregation cases, that curriculums are drawn along social class and racial lines, even to the point that schools of different racial and social class composition within the same school district offer differing opportunities to their students. The second question has often been given a back seat in our quest for back-to-basics learning. Yet, I believe that a child who accepts or participates in acts of injustice is just as handicapped as one who lacks skills in reading and writing.

Destructive Evaluation

Unfortunately, the road to accountability in teaching cognitive and noncognitive subject matter is strewn with ethical complications. The evaluators, the watchdogs of our teaching systems, may often stress skill learning, while the classroom teacher may sense that other more subtle lessons are being taught but not being recognized by evaluators.

After the statewide uniform assessment program began in Michigan, School Superintendent Lawrence F. Read of Jackson called this undertaking into question for allegedly imposing a philosophy of education on local districts. Read reasoned that the testing program emphasized successful rote learning in basic skills areas and proceeded, through norm-referenced scoring, to rank students and schools only on this basis.

Regardless of progress in many schools with unique curricula, the assessment program could deem these schools inferior. As a matter of fact, with norm-referenced scoring, 50 percent of all schools were always considered "below average" by those who took test data at face value. Many school boards were smarting after the release of data showing their schools in the lower half of the distribution. Some school administrators were threatened and felt that the reputations of their schools were tarnished. What school boards were experiencing was the same phenomenon that had long plagued students: that is, damage because of disclosure of data from arbitrary testing programs. Predestined failure through ranking and labeling of students was the result of many intelligence and aptitude scores. The difference now was that the accountability for failure was being placed on educators rather than learners. The reaction of teachers' groups to news of falling scores on standardized tests over the past several

years is to say that tests are outdated and unable to assess what children are learning today.

Unfortunately, too, administrators are pressured to put the onus of the perceived problem back on the students by blaming their poor performance simply on the fact that they are poor students. Students are thereby visited again by the injustice of those misusing standardized testing.

The basic ethical question that must persistently be asked about any evaluation program, whether it be evaluating student ability or curricular effectiveness is: Is this process of evaluation judgmental and destructive, or is it constructive and serving the needs of students?

Much curriculum evaluation as practiced today is, at best, a waste of time and at worst destructive of staff morale and ruinous of the life chances of many students. Educational evaluation is not often used as a guide for improvement of curriculums. Instead, it has sometimes become a procedure to justify spending increases or cutbacks in education programs.

Laudable intentions may be behind the use of tests, such as proving the needs of underfunded schools by showing low achievement of students. Unfortunately, the other side of the coin is that when extra funds have been used properly and progress made toward better achievement, improved assessment scores have sometimes been used as a signal to state authorities to cut the flow of state funds. It is not inconceivable that some schools may even be tempted to fudge scores to maintain funding levels. Clearly, some administrators may perceive that under such a system it may be in their best interest to have poor achievement scores and to portray their program as poor and ineffectual to state agencies. Teachers who wish to see students improve may not be encouraged for fear of funding losses. They may soon find themselves believing that the situation is hopeless and subsequently may become totally demoralized.

There are many other variables that need to be measured so that such a rigid, nonfunctional reward structure is not established. Measures of dollars per pupil spent coupled with the socioeconomic standing of students can gauge how much needed educational help students are getting. In terms of affective learning, much can be

ascertained from a simple measure of socioeconomic and racial mix of the student body and staff. A homogeneous school environment is likely to produce narrow attitudes that are not conducive to participation in a pluralistic or cosmopolitan society.

Constructive Evaluation

Constructive curriculum evaluation by means of testing is more likely when it is the responsi-

"The basic ethical question that must be persistently asked about any evaluation program . . . is: Is this process of evaluation judgmental and destructive, or is it constructive and serving the needs of students?"

bility of each district. This way, improvement of the curriculum and thereby improvement of student learning could more easily be the guiding objectives. In this environment, the goals of the curriculum will ultimately decide the processes of instruction and determine the criteria by which the curriculum is evaluated. If a broad cross-section of the school district populace is involved in determining goals, then it is more likely that the interests of a wider number of children will be considered. It is more likely, for instance, that the school's aim will be to foster the performance of low achievers as much as enhancing that of high achievers. Often the narrow aims of a district's curricula are reflected in their use of assessment data. For example, many districts simply record the mean score of norm-referenced tests as a measure of their schools' successes. A school whose pupils have a relatively high mean score would rate itself better-than-average without regard for possible weaknesses in the curriculum that are at the root of their failure to reach certain segments of the student population. This is indefensible. Such practice allows the good performances of a few students who may do particularly well to cloud the problems of those whose performance is not adequate.

Constructive assessment depends on a thor-

ough analysis of test data to reveal specific curricular weaknesses. Both strengths and weaknesses should be matters for neither reward nor punishment, but should be emphasized in an ongoing process of evaluation followed by modification. If school personnel are punished because weaknesses exist, they cannot be expected to admit their problems. And failure to recognize them prohibits working to remedy them.

"The bottom line of ethical evaluation of curricula is whether or not administrators will face up to the failures of a curriculum that they had a hand in selecting and formulating."

The fear of test results can be further dealt with by making community people aware of what will be measured and how a curriculum will be evaluated. The public should also be made aware of the limitations and shortcomings of tests as well as how data concerning their children will be handled.

It should be remembered that any use of curriculum evaluation data for purposes other than describing the effectiveness of the curriculum is improper. The use of these data to label or categorize an individual child is certainly inappropriate. Scores should not be released to anyone outside the school system without the parents' permission. Within the school system, use and dissemination of data that can be traced back to a specific child should be subject to strict guidelines. Counselors should serve as keepers of the data and should be available to parents to interpret the data. Raw evaluation data should not be available to teachers without their demonstrated ability to interpret it. Teachers who, because of test scores, believe a child is indisposed to learning, could be preempting a capable child's opportunity to learn through subconsciously motivated behavior. It would be better to allow teachers to see the child's "trends" of improved or lessened rates of achievement without reference to the absolute scores. Counselors could also point out weaknesses in the child's learning pat-

terns to help teachers evaluate their own presentations of subject matter.

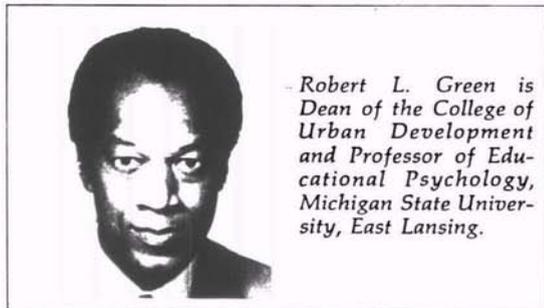
If, at the end of a districtwide assessment effort, it can be seen that certain segments of the school population are not being served, then improvements must be made. If evaluation data are ignored, then the purpose of the assessment program has not been fulfilled.

The bottom line of ethical evaluation of curricula is whether or not administrators will face up to the failures of a curriculum that they had a hand in selecting and formulating. For this reason, professional evaluators should be brought in from the outside. Outsiders can assist district personnel in determining whether the curriculum and its accomplishments are congruent with the district's achievement goals. Without help in facing up to the possibility of shortcomings in course presentation, administrators will be tempted to blame children for low achievement.

Conclusion

Much of our present-day practices of evaluating curriculum cannot be described as ethical. Procedures tend to be destructive rather than constructive. When norm-referenced standardized tests are used as the basis for making evaluations, the results can be misleading, fragmentary, and demoralizing for students, teachers, and school administrators.

Curriculum evaluation studies seldom address the questions I have suggested as being of critical importance: equality of educational opportunity and availability of noncognitive learning opportunities. Unless these shortcomings are acknowledged and dealt with, it is difficult to place confidence in the ethical quality of curriculum evaluation. ²⁷



Robert L. Green is Dean of the College of Urban Development and Professor of Educational Psychology, Michigan State University, East Lansing.

Copyright © 1978 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.