

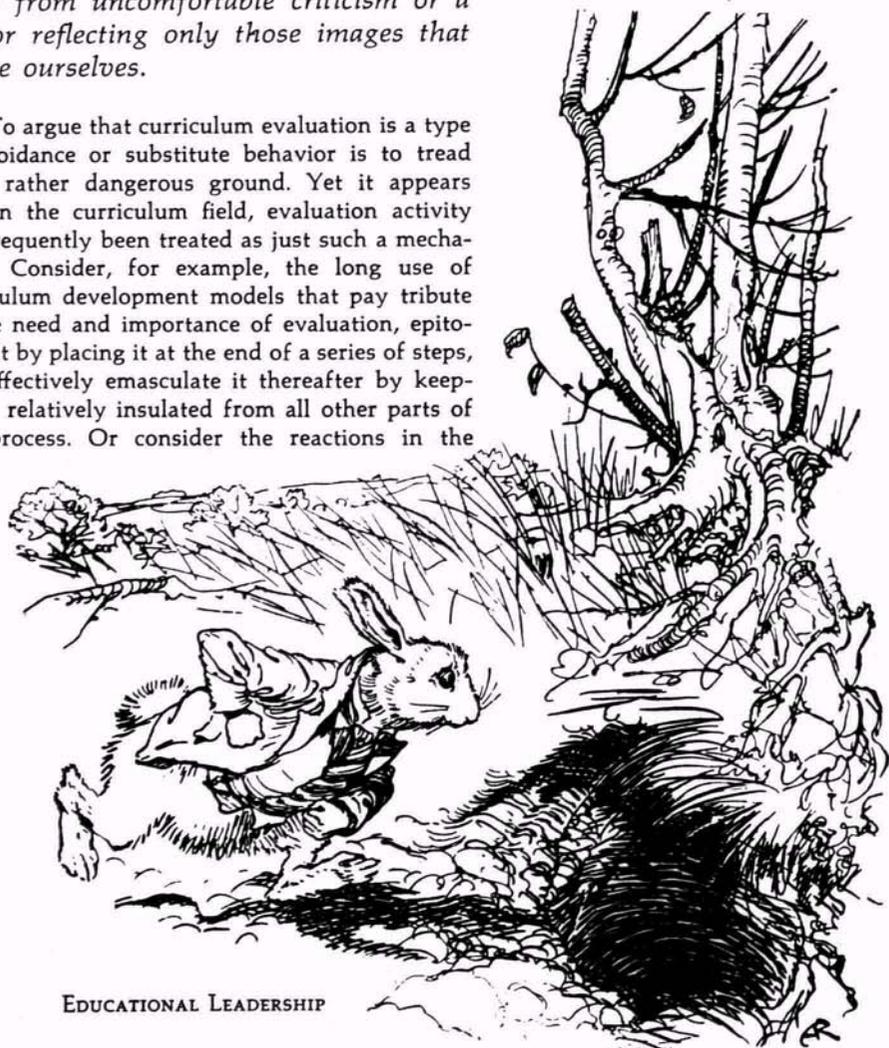
Looking glasses, rabbit holes, and curriculum evaluation

Naomi Hersom

and curriculum evaluation

By identifying evaluation activity in relation to one or more specified curriculum problems, it should be possible to make evaluation something other than an escape route from uncomfortable criticism or a mirror reflecting only those images that please ourselves.

To argue that curriculum evaluation is a type of avoidance or substitute behavior is to tread some rather dangerous ground. Yet it appears that in the curriculum field, evaluation activity has frequently been treated as just such a mechanism. Consider, for example, the long use of curriculum development models that pay tribute to the need and importance of evaluation, epitomize it by placing it at the end of a series of steps, but effectively emasculate it thereafter by keeping it relatively insulated from all other parts of the process. Or consider the reactions in the



1970s to public criticism of school programs, policies, and expenditures that led to the implementation of goal assessment activities, program budgeting schemes, and ultimately, to an educational Olympics under the aegis of the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement (Purves and Levine, 1975). Can curriculum evaluation ever be something more than a journey "through the looking glass" or "down a rabbit hole" into a world where things are really not what they appear to be?

I would submit that some of the problems encountered when one undertakes something labeled curriculum evaluation, arise because in the first instance, the nature of the curriculum problem or of the evaluation problem is not identified carefully enough, and in the second instance, this leads to an inappropriate matching of evaluation concepts and procedures to the particular curricular process or product being evaluated. The complexities of planning and implementing curriculum evaluation activities on a large scale are not to be denied. The technical and practical problems encountered by even the most highly skilled and knowledgeable practitioner are formidable (Popham and Carlson, 1977). Undeniably, there have been refinements in evaluation theory and more intensive research. Nevertheless, it would seem that all of us associated in one way or another with curriculum evaluation activities might helpfully reconceptualize our tasks to avoid the classic dilemma so well illustrated in Alice's conversation:

"Cheshire Puss," Alice began, "would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where," said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

"... so long as I get somewhere," Alice said, as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

To say that the choice of the way we ought to take should be dependent on where we want to go seems so obvious a statement that we tend to underestimate its importance. We have been spending a great deal of time in the evaluation field investigating the ways we are taking. It is clearly necessary that we do so. The development



Illustrations: Arthur Rackham. From: Lewis Carroll. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. New York: The Viking Press, 1975. pp. 3, 79. Used by permission of the publisher.

of evaluation theory, the invention and application of designs and techniques, the mastery of requisite skills and knowledge are certainly basic to the evaluation enterprise. But to expend a large proportion of our energies for such purposes is to diminish the importance of knowing where we want those routes to take us. When we follow the road marked "evaluation" in the curriculum domain, it would be wise to be clearer than we have been in the past about identifying our destinations. Changing the analogy a little, we can liken it to determining whether we want an aerial survey of topography, or a rapid tour of selected points of interest, or a visit to a particular place for long enough to get to know the inhabitants, their language, and their way of living.

Identification Is Needed

All of this serves to illustrate three of the major aspects of curriculum evaluation that require some clear-eyed identification: (a) the scope or level at which the curriculum is being evaluated; (b) the particular part or parts of the cur-

riculum to be evaluated; and (c) the appropriate evaluation arrangements that therefore need to be made. By identifying evaluation activity in relation to one or more specified curriculum problems, it should be possible to make evaluation something other than an escape route from uncomfortable criticism or a mirror reflecting only those images that please ourselves.

Problems of scope and level are perhaps not too difficult to describe. Alkin (1975), for example, distinguished levels of accountability within school districts related to goals, programs, and outcomes, and further related each of these to responsible persons or bodies—the school boards under review by the public, the administrators

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and professional staff, and the teachers. Problems of evaluation during development or implementation stages are not quite as amenable to classification. However, if categories are established according to whether plans or effects are the primary focus of concern, then some greater clarity might be achieved. If curriculum development is undertaken, at whatever level, then evaluation must be bound to examine the planned content, procedures, and the presuppositions selected during the development process. On the other hand, if curriculum implementation is being evaluated, then evaluation takes on a quite different nature. It is bound to look at the effects of implementation, and to be restrained, if necessary, from applying its findings without care or much question to matters of curriculum development.

There is still another basis for the classification of the problems of curriculum evaluation: the distinction between problem-solving activities that are geared to devise or to create new solutions, and those that are associated with the selection of the best solution from among those available, on the grounds that quite different kinds of problem-solving processes are suitable

in each case (Oberg, 1975). It appears reasonable to propose, using this argument, that solutions to problems of curriculum and problems of evaluation could be found more efficiently if curriculumists and evaluators both are clear in their thinking about the nature of the problem-solving process itself.

Conceptualizing a curriculum evaluation problem in terms of its extensiveness does not appear to be too demanding a task in itself. There are examples available of assessments that are national and international in scope; there are province or statewide studies, as well as evaluation studies within school systems, within schools and classrooms, and with individual learners. Some of the difficulties encountered in each of these seem to be related mainly to the scope of the activity.

At the international level, there is some danger of laboring mightily to arrive at the merely obvious. This is illustrated by the report of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (Purves and Levine, 1975) of the finding that clear discrepancies in achievement exist between the more and the less technologically-developed nations as well as within groups of nations (p. x). These evaluators also concluded that even the most sophisticated research techniques presently available are inadequate to cope with the complex relationships among variables related to test scores, schools, homes, teachers, and students. In summary, the assessors went on to suggest that their findings have implications for policy planners and for curriculum in terms of the degree of selectivity imposed by a nation's educational system and the economics of education. Such statements about matters already well-supported by historical and technical evidence available to all countries long before the international assessment studies were initiated exemplify the misassignment of resources to evaluation of this scope, when the same resources could have been applied to finding solutions to genuine problems of curriculum and evaluation on a smaller scale. One can only reflect on some of the possible non-curricular and nonevaluative reasons that such large scale assessment activities have been deemed to be necessary. In a set of projects undertaken in three Canadian provinces, Alberta, Sas-

katchewan, and Manitoba, ranging in scope from classroom to school system levels, it was found that there were few strategies available that were suitable to small scale evaluation studies. Procedures and theories that have grown largely out of federally-sponsored projects in the United States, could not be forced to fit quite different sets of variables. The attempts to make such applications were predictably unsatisfactory and frustrating (Riffel, Schalm, and Hersom, 1975).

The Dual Nature of Problems

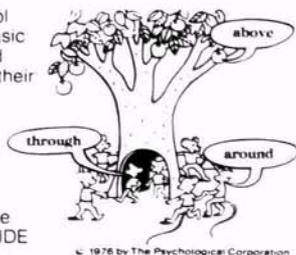
With experiences like these in mind, the curriculumist is reminded of the dual nature of the problems at every level of curricular activity: (a) to find or to devise a solution appropriate to the particular curriculum enterprise in question; and (b) to find or to devise an evaluation procedure suited to the nature of the particular enterprise.

One of the hazards of undertaking evaluation studies will inevitably emerge should the distinction between plans and effects be ignored. When assessing the effects of the curriculum that has been implemented, it is a temptation to attribute these effects to the original nature of the curriculum as it was developed instead of examining carefully what was, in fact, the nature of the curriculum as implemented. By keeping these two types of evaluation separate, some of the problematic aspects of curriculum evaluation might be avoided. It should be clear to parents, teachers, and administrators, that a curriculum in use that is characterized by a certain content and emphasis will have a different effect on academic achievement than another curriculum characterized by a different kind of content and emphasis (Walker and Schaffarzick, 1974).

I have proposed that curriculumists and evaluators would be more successful in accomplishing their purposes if they would conceptualize their tasks according to scope and primary characteristics. I believe such conceptualizations will make curriculum and evaluation studies much more precise in their purposes and lead to better employment of appropriate types of inquiry. This implies that evaluators would have to be satisfied with somewhat less grandiose designs than have been used recently, and that they would disci-

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pline themselves to remain within the boundaries of a selected curriculum and/or evaluation category. It also implies that curriculumists and evaluators would have to build a different set of expectations about evaluation tasks in the minds of the public and the profession.

But is this a realistic solution or just another way of avoiding the essence of the curriculum evaluation problem? Glass (1975) might argue that I have entirely ignored a paradox that confronts every evaluator: should excellence be viewed as something that is not contingent on any scale of merit but one's own, or should excellence be attained by open scrutiny of one's purposes, measuring and judging actions, and using such information in an effort to change and to improve? Glass's own conclusion, after critical examination of the assumptions underlying evaluation activities in education, is that the paradox will remain unresolved until historians, and not statisticians, read the data. Even if one accepts this conclusion, it has all the earmarks of being one more escape route—this time an escape into the future.

The practitioner and the researcher cannot afford the luxury of such a response to demands for curriculum evaluation. Glass's analysis may be quite correct, but hardly sufficient. In the everyday world of schools and classrooms, school systems and governments, interim answers and not ultimate answers are needed. While journeys through looking glasses and down rabbit holes might have certain attributes endearing them to curriculumists and evaluators alike, I would argue that it is possible to discover other routes open to those who are willing to think about where they would like to go. [E]

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Naomi Hersom is Professor of Education and Director of Undergraduate Programs, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

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