

# A Contextual Appraisal System for Schools: Medicine or Madness?

You can use the approach pioneered by John Goodlad and his associates in *A Study of Schooling* to analyze your school's context for teaching and learning.



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Organizations are not ordinarily perfect. But there do exist prescriptions—not cure-alls—that help alleviate ailments and enhance the quality of products. A brewery, for example, will find defects in its outcomes: half-filled bottles, loose caps, poor shelf-life, bad taste. Management would be foolish, of course, not to periodically assess these outcomes. They could compare the number of loosely-capped bottles to an industry average, taking more or less comfort in being above or below the norm. More likely, management will determine its own criterion of performance based on a tolerable dollar loss.

In any case, the assessment is not the remedy—it's only a sign that something's wrong. Is the bottle-capping machine defective? Has it not been serviced correctly? Are the machine operators negligent, inattentive, ineffectively trained? An inordinate proportion of bad tasting brews could indicate bad ingredients, unwise buyers, faulty timing mechanisms, low morale among workers and so forth. Our apologies to any brewmasters reading this article; we have probably oversimplified the process. But one thing is clear: *without sufficient understanding of the context within which the process takes place, outcome indices have little or no value, beyond their immediate descriptive signal, for helping direct an agenda for improvement.*

Now it is not uncommon for organizational theorists to use the factory model when viewing schools. In go the raw materials (uneducated children) and out come the products (learned citizens). Anybody intimately familiar with schools, however, knows that the schooling process defies analogy with the factory model. Those of us in A Study of

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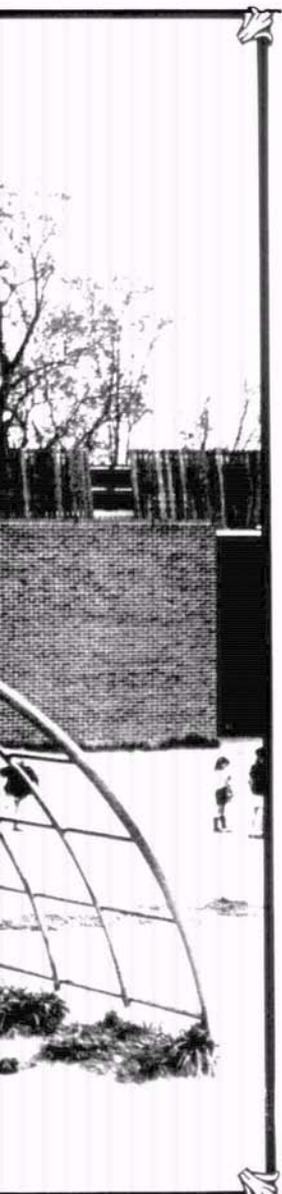
Schooling—a study concerned with educationally-relevant contextual variables—eschewed at the outset this view of schools and schooling. Yet, if we pursue the school-as-a-factory metaphor just a bit further, the critical argument of this paper remains evident and the imminent breakdown of the analogy is instructive.

Those who manage schools typically assess their products with periodic achievement tests. This testing may signal that something is wrong, but the signal is nonspecific as to the genesis of the problem. Is it poor teaching practices, sloppy curricula continua, unfavorable working conditions, weak administrative leadership, apathetic students, or unsupportive home environments? More than likely, it is some interactive combination of two or more of these and/or other reasons.

And so the factory analogy dissolves. The management of the brewery has the luxury of *reacting*, that is, working backwards from the sign of a problem to solutions with high probabilities of success. Although the roots of their problems may be complicated, those bottles will soon come out ready for delivery and meeting specified margins of error. Not so for schooling—reactions by school officials yield few problem-solving strategies capable of being implemented in a time frame that doesn't radically outdate the original sign of the problem. The "machinery" of schooling is too multifaceted and interactive to permit quick traces on problems as they happen to occur.

Ironically, schools emphasize to students the importance of acquiring relevant information in order to understand complex processes. Yet it is rare, if not unheard of, for schools to practice what they teach—learning as much as they can about themselves before attempting to define problems and arrive at solutions. How many schools have considered data beyond scores on standardized reading tests before spending considerable effort and dollars, altering

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curricular patterns and student assignment practices, to install and staff a reading laboratory? However, this particular "solution" to a school's reading "problem" may be quite inappropriate given other relevant information about the students, community, staff, and the school itself. As we all know, nearly every school has closets full of corpses—the no-longer-used machinery and materials of hastily implemented solutions that, for some reason, didn't work.

It is important to note that our concern has grown out of our own direct experience with schools, recently in *A Study of Schooling* and previously during longitudinal work with the *Study of Educational Change and School Improvement* of the Institute for Development of Educational Activities. Both of these projects were strongly influenced by John Goodlad's views regarding schooling (see Goodlad, 1965; 1975a, Chapter 8; and 1975b).

The "Rx" we propose is therefore, at the core, *information*—information collected in an ongoing way, about relevant areas of the educational process that are anticipated to have important consequences for learning and instruction. It is our intention here to make clear what some of these areas are and why they are relevant. In effect, we are recommending that schools experiment with a comprehensive formative evaluation<sup>1</sup> system that not only includes periodic assessment of student achievement, but also periodic assessment of teaching practices, class climates, adult working environment, parent attitudes, and so forth—that is, an array of important descriptors of the schooling context.

If you expect to have the formula for installing a comprehensive information system at your school after reading this article, you will be disappointed. We hope you will be pleased, however, if you expect to be more informed about the rationale for a contextual appraisal system, the scope of such a system, some likely contents of the system, first-step considerations in designing and implementing the system, and some sources for further information.

### The Rudiments of Context

Contextual variables can be defined as those elements that contribute to the environment of the classroom,

Figure 1. A Framework for Identifying and Organizing Contextual Variables.

		Contextual Domains			
		Personal (Self)	Instructional (Class)	Institutional (School)	Societal (Schooling)
Data Sources	Teachers				
	Students		<b>Data Collection Devices</b> Surveys Interviews Observation schedules Curriculum materials samplings Document reviews Naturalistic methods		
	Parents				
	Observers	X			X

school, and community within which school-based learning takes place. As a means of operationalizing this notion, four contextual domains can be identified: personal, instructional, institutional, and societal. The levels at which information is gathered in each of these domains are, respectively, the individual (or self), the classroom, the school, and schooling in general.

When these domains are crossed with potential data sources, the schematic in Figure 1 emerges (adapted from Goodlad and others, 1979) and serves as a convenient rubric for identifying and organizing contextual variables.

The delineation of domains and the development of Figure 1 are merely convenient means for organizing the large numbers of variables to be included in the kind of appraisal system we propose here. Much of the data are not always neatly confined to a single domain. And often identical types of data are valuable when collected from more than one source. Further, information gained from sources other than those listed (principals, school board members, and other community people,

for example) and about variables not fitting neatly into the figure (district policies and community characteristics, for instance) are important in seeing the total school context. However, the bulk of the variables we view as critical can be fitted into this framework. The list of data-gathering devices useful in obtaining information, superimposed on the figure, makes clear our conviction that multiple methodologies as well as multiple data sources are crucial in developing a comprehensive view of contextual elements and the relationships among them.

But where in this schematic does the assessment of student learning fit? We and significant others (teachers, parents, and students) believe that intellectual development is the single most important function of schooling (see Overman, 1980a). Interpreted broadly, the context of schooling should also include data on student learning. Depending on the purpose of assessing achievement, these measures would be classified in any of the four domains. Including achievement as a contextual variable departs somewhat from the more traditional input-output models that

cast achievement measures as outcome variables and everything else as context. Two conceptual benefits obtain, however, by treating achievement as a contextual variable: (1) the interconnectedness of the learning environment is emphasized and (2) the false dichotomy of input-output is deemphasized. Achievement scores may be "outputs" for one class but "inputs" for the next class; measures of classroom climate may be "outcomes" of instructional practices. A contextual appraisal system, therefore, must include periodic assessment of student achievement. We will not discuss this topic in detail because it would take at least the space allotted for this entire article, and because considerable work by others has focused on the development of systems for the formative evaluation of student learning.

We now consider in more detail those data categories in each domain that, from our analyses of *A Study of Schooling* data, show promise as useful contextual variables. All of the data to be discussed fit into the organizing framework shown in Figure 1. The ways variables are defined and measured are evident in the instruments available from the Laboratory in School and Community Education, Graduate School of Education, UCLA.

### The Personal Domain

Characteristics of students, parents, and teachers are likely to influence their participation in and their perceptions of school. Few of these variables alone, however, contribute much to the explanation of differences in specific school and classroom phenomena. Even such educationally relevant factors as why teachers entered the profession and years of experience add little to the understanding of their behavioral differences in the school and classroom setting (Heckman, 1981; Sirotnik, 1981a). There are exceptions, however. For example, *A Study of Schooling* analyses were consistent with the work of others in that student ethnicity and socioeconomic status emerged as salient background characteristics, associated with differences both in the actual experiences of students in schools and in their perceptions of their classrooms (Engstrom, 1981; Oakes, 1981b). In collecting demographic information

about students, therefore, we suggest that this category be defined in a very comprehensive way and include data not usually gathered. Cultural patterns such as communication styles, learning modes, and belief systems have been shown to differ substantially among population subgroups. And, importantly, they appear to have considerable influence on both students' behavior and the way schools respond to them. While information about these characteristics may be more difficult to obtain, their importance suggests they not be overlooked.<sup>2</sup>

### The Instructional Domain

This category of variables, closest to actual teaching and learning, is perhaps the most critical for an understanding of student outcomes. The ultimate payoff occurs, of course, when these contextual descriptions can be linked to instructionally sensitive student learning indicators.

We are convinced that in coming to know the classroom context at least three types of information are essential. First are basic class descriptions—characteristics including size, time of day, length; subject areas, track level; sex, age, ethnicity of students; and the physical environment. Second are events that take place in the classroom including how time is spent; the content of instruction; activities engaged in; materials, grouping patterns, and evaluation methods used; teachers' instructional strategies; level of student involvement; decision-making patterns; and, finally, the kinds of interactions between teachers and students and their affective tone. The third type of information is the responses of participants to classroom characteristics and events. This last group includes the evaluation of classroom commonplaces listed above—content, activities materials, and so on, judgments about relationships, and responses to the overall climate.

By interrelating these three types of information, a comprehensive and more accurate picture can be obtained regarding what actually is going on in the classroom, why things might happen as they do, and how the participants feel about the various classroom phenomena. To illustrate, analysis of curriculum materials only might lead to the conclusion that students in similar classrooms are

acquiring similar learnings. But what students actually learn is mediated by numerous contextual variables such as teacher beliefs, actual (versus intended) curricula, instructional strategies, and student characteristics and perceptions. Analyses from *A Study of Schooling* clearly indicate that the juxtaposition of these data better clarifies what actually is intended to be taught and what is most likely to be learned.<sup>3</sup>

Another illustration derives from recent research pointing to the importance of time as an element of students' academic achievement (Carroll, 1963; Bloom, 1976; Wiley, 1973). But research has also established that differences in the climates of classrooms account for significant variance in learning outcomes (Walberg and Anderson, 1972, among others). With additional contextual data accounted for, the "missing links" between these two lines of research begin to fall into place. *A Study of Schooling* analyses indicate, for example, that instructional practices, class climate, class size, and track level predict time spent on discipline and instruction (Sirotnik, 1981a). In another study of two multiethnic secondary schools, classroom climates were found to have little effect on the attendance patterns and achievement of the Anglo students, but substantial and significant effects were found for Mexican-American students (Engstrom, 1981).

It is one thing to talk from a general research perspective about how particular variables can shed light on classroom phenomena. It is quite another to see how data combine to form more dynamic portraits of single classrooms. We offer the following discussion of two of the more than 1,000 classrooms included in the *A Study of Schooling* sample. These classrooms, chosen quite arbitrarily, illustrate an important point nicely. Learning settings that appear to be remarkably similar can prove to be quite different when contextual variables are examined.

The two classes were studied at a white suburban elementary school. Both were traditional looking classrooms—single rooms with desks arranged in rows. Adequately stocked with books, magazines, maps, globes, and chalkboards, neither had plants, animals, nor student-made decorations. Twenty-six fourth graders con-

stituted one class, and 30 fifth graders the other. The teachers had similar student learning goals: acquiring basic skills and developing positive relationships. Both teachers felt clearly in charge of their classes. Neither complained of too little time for instruction. Pretty similar places.

But on close examination, one emerged as both more satisfying and more likely to enhance learning. The accumulation of many small differences appears to have made a considerable difference in the experiences of students. Three indicators signal that the fifth grade class was a more constructive learning environment than the fourth. First, 81 percent of the class time was observed to be spent on instruction, while only 17 percent on classroom routines and 2 percent on behavior. The fourth grade class, more typical of classes studied, spent 71 percent of the time on instruction, 25 percent on routines, and 3 percent on behavior. Second, in the fifth grade class 90 percent of the students were observed to be highly interested in classroom activities; in the fourth grade class approximately 80 percent were so involved. And third, 83 percent of the fifth grade compared to 73 of the fourth grade responded that they usually felt good about what happened in class. Further, only 21 percent of the fifth graders, compared to 42 percent of the fourth, said that students in their class don't care about what goes on.

Differences in the conduct of these two classes provide clues as to why the fifth grade class stands out as more positive. The fifth grade class was more interactive than the fourth with more of both adult and student talk. The dominant activities in the fourth grade classroom were the teacher explaining to the total class and/or students working independently on written assignments while the teacher explained to one student. These activities, also frequent in the fifth grade, were supplemented with considerable time spent in reading, discussion, and recitation. The classes differed in the teachers' use of instructional behaviors known to be linked with students' achievement in academics: in the use of appropriate practice, in clarifying the purpose of instruction, in assigning tasks at the right difficulty level, and in teacher enthusiasm. These teachers were also different in their relationships with

students, in that the fifth grade teacher was seen as more concerned and less likely to have favorites.

Related to these differences are the ways *students* perceived classroom processes. The fifth graders reported considerably more time spent on learning and less time on behavior. The fourth graders reported nearly equal amounts of time on both. Generally, the fifth graders were also more positive about instructional activities in the class. The most telling differences, however, are in the responses to questions asking students to name the most important things learned. The fifth grade responses reflect a variety in both instructional activity and concepts learned. In contrast, a common response from the fourth graders for most subjects was "nothing."

We could continue describing differences between these classes. But



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information. . . .

the point is clear: with a proper database perspective even subtle differences in classrooms appear to transcend fundamental similarities among them and are highly associated with their quality, both in terms of satisfaction and educational effectiveness. Most significant is that these specifics are, for the most part alterable.

### The Institutional Domain

The third domain consists of variables about the school as a unit, excluding elements specific to classrooms. We believe this array of variables to be extremely useful in assessing how satisfying a school is to participants and how contextual elements of the school at large are likely to enhance or limit its educational effectiveness. As in the instructional domain we are convinced that knowing what a school is like, how it

functions as a unit, and how participants feel about the school's characteristics and ways of operating are essential.

The most basic set of school level variables is that information schools now regularly keep: student population statistics, class size and teacher/pupil ratio data, fiscal records, and student absentee and transiency rates. Other basic descriptors, not usually kept track of, include information on the instructional program: percentages of teachers in secondary subject areas or the amount of time spent in instruction in various subjects at elementary schools, and the type of tracking or ability grouping procedures used at the school. Also pertinent are perceptions of the school's program, for example, judgments of the relative importance placed on four main functions of schooling—intellectual, social, vocational, and personal.

These demographic and programmatic "outlines" of schools are filled in with specific information about the day-to-day functioning of the school. The staff can be questioned about a wide range of school processes including how school decisions are made and problems solved; who has influence at the school, how much and over what; how the staff works together as a group; what kind of leadership the principal provides and how parents participate in the school. Students can be asked about extracurricular activities, the availability of counselor help, and the accessibility of the principal to them, and about the student culture—the friendliness of other students and which types of students seem to be most popular at school. All participants (including parents) can give information about what problems the school faces. Finally, to round out the view of the larger school context, it is helpful to ascertain how school participants feel about the school's characteristics and ways of doing things. Examples are overall quality ratings such as grading the school from A to F; general judgments about the education students receive, "This school gives students a good education"; and reactions to very specific aspects of the school's processes, "Student government is a waste of time" (students) or "In general, how satisfied are you with the current teacher evaluation system used at this school?" (teachers) or

"My child is graded too easy at this school" (parents). Also important are teacher, parent, and student preferences regarding the four schooling functions and the congruence of these preferences with what they see emphasized (Overman, 1980a).

These feelings about school turn out to be especially important since schools, like classrooms, appearing to be quite similar on commonly obtained school measures, are likely to elicit very different evaluations from participants. Here again is why a comprehensive set of data is essential: differences in reactions toward schools have little meaning without additional information about what the schools are like. Consider two large senior high schools from A Study of Schooling, both located in major metropolitan areas. The schools were similar in their population characteristics and in the structure and content of the program they offered. Yet these schools, much like the classrooms considered earlier, emerged as very different places when we looked more closely at the specifics of their contexts.

When parents, teachers, and students graded their schools, one received a C from parents and teachers, the other a B. While students graded their schools between a C and a B, other responses indicated greater student dissatisfaction at the school given the lower grade by adults. Many of the more specific school level variables point to aspects of the school context that may contribute to the differences in these evaluations. Teachers provided pictures of each school that differed substantially in their emphasis on student learning and academics. Parents, students, and teachers at the less satisfying and less academically focused of our two schools perceived more problems and problems of greater intensity than did respondents at the other. We know from our analysis of data from all the schools in A Study of Schooling that the number and intensity of problems at a school is strongly associated with students' perceptions of the quality of education provided them at that school (Overman, 1980b). Moreover, it is clear from other work that the quality of the academic atmosphere at a school is an important factor in its overall educational effectiveness (Brookover and others, 1979; and Rutter and others, 1979,

are illustrative).

Not to be overlooked are the different perceptions of the school's work environments. Teachers at the B school were more positive about their principal's leadership style, staff relationships, problem-solving processes, and influence over school decisions. Teachers at the C school were distinctly lower on all these dimensions of work climate. Other A Study of Schooling work supports these findings. Schools, in general, were more satisfying when they were administered by autonomous principals who regarded their staffs as competent (Morris, 1981). Further, those schools emerging with more "self-renewing" organizational climates were characterized by greater teacher satisfaction, stronger principal leadership, and more staff cohesiveness than schools found to be less "self-renewing" (Heckman, 1981).



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What do we learn from all of this? Well, we learn that two schools, despite their similarities, can be clearly different in how satisfying they are and in the quality of education they are seen as providing. But more important, we pinpoint specific areas of school context associated with these more global constructs. For purposes of school improvement these areas are those in which intervention and change efforts may be productive. Are school comparisons necessary for this process? We think not. Having information as to *specific* areas of concern or dissatisfaction should be enough. A school staff interested in improvement need not know how teachers at other schools responded when faced with the fact that 87 percent of them agreed that "too many students are allowed to graduate without learning very much" to

know they have a very real problem on which they can focus improvement efforts.

### The Societal Domain

At the other end of our "contextual continuum" is information collected about participants' views about schooling issues in general. Global views participants hold about schooling constitute a part of the larger context in which a particular school operates. We believe that this "societal" context relates to the direction of schooling at the local level. As a part of this domain, administrators, teachers, students, parents, and other community people can be asked for their views on such issues as desegregation and busing, fiscal support of education, teacher unions, minimum competency requirements, and other continuing or current school concerns.

The information gained from these kinds of items can be used by schools in a variety of ways—as stimulation for discussion and clarification of community values and beliefs in regard to schooling, for example. These data can be used in connection with school and class level data to chart relationships between views on schooling issues and related schooling practices. An illustration of one relationship between views on schooling issues and school practice might be useful at this point. At the three schools in the A Study of Schooling sample where students were bused for purposes of desegregation, certain discrepancies appeared. Participants expressed quite negative beliefs about busing in general, but the busing that took place was not seen as a major problem. Negative views on this controversial issue may not have been powerful enough to sabotage the practice; perhaps the practice served to soften views that may have been even more negative without it. We may hypothesize that this was the case, for as negative as the people at these schools were about busing, they were less so than those at schools where no busing took place. The assessment of views on this issue at regular intervals set alongside data about busing in practice would be necessary to confirm this speculation. This would be fascinating information for these schools to have. To the extent that similar relationships hold for other innovative or controver-

sial school practices, this information is extremely valuable for schools and districts contemplating or undergoing these types of changes.

### The Convergence of Domains

From analyses in *A Study of Schooling* a general trend emerges. The closer a contextual element is to the schooling phenomenon in question, the more likely differences in the phenomenon are systematically related to the contextual element. Even so, for many aspects of schooling, variables from more than one domain must come together to permit a useful understanding of the dynamics of the processes and outcomes involved.

A clear illustration is the whole notion of equality of educational opportunity—that is whether all students within the school have equal access to the knowledge and positive educational experiences provided. The question of access to learning can be examined at the school level by looking at counseling practices, for example, or at the perceptions of various groups about the quality of education they are receiving. Or, this issue can be viewed at the classroom level by studying such contextual elements as teacher-student interaction patterns. The complexity of this issue, however, probably demands the gathering and juxtaposition of data from more than just one domain.

This point is well exemplified by data about one of the multiethnic senior highs in *A Study of Schooling* where we studied the access Mexican-American and Anglo students had to vocational education, a subject heavily emphasized at the school. For such an inquiry, it was essential to know the ethnicity of students taking various classes, information that we have identified as in the personal domain. Also needed were data about what vocational classes were offered to students, a school level variable. Finally, descriptions of the format and instructional content of each of the classes offered—data falling in the instructional domain—were necessary. The kinds of differences that emerged indicated that non-Whites more than Whites were being directed in their vocational training toward futures in lower-class social and economic positions (Oakes, 1981a). Given the already high dropout rate among Mexican-Americans—about 45 percent nationally—this could be a



Photo: Michael Sexton

most serious consequence (Carnegie Council, 1979). But, only with information from all three domains could any pattern of differential access at the school be identified in a comprehensive way. And only with all this information is it possible to point to and correct any specific practices that worked to limit the educational opportunity of the Mexican-American students at the school.

The point of the example is this: If we had looked more superficially at the question of student ethnicity

and educational opportunity at this school, we might have concluded that educational equity was not a problem. For example, if we had only examined the percentages of White and Mexican-American students assigned to vocational courses, roughly equivalent figures, we would have come to quite misleading and incomplete conclusions. Only with the juxtaposition of several domains of data was important and *useful* insight gained into the equity question at this school.

### Thoughts Regarding Implementation

If we had to choose the most important thought to convey at this point, it would be this: *there are really no prescriptions for instantly successful contextual appraisal systems that fit perfectly the needs of your particular school or district.* Although we have tried to be specific about the kinds of contextual data likely to be useful, these should only be regarded as examples derived from a research study, and not from an actual attempt to design, install, and manage such a system. What follows, then, is a series of important considerations for beginning any serious attempt at the kind of innovation suggested here.

*Organizational Theory and Innovation Strategies.* The importance of accurately perceiving and coping with the realities of the organizational structure of schools and districts cannot be overstated, if one has any hope of instituting changes requiring the support of many significant persons in the system. Traditional views of schools, growing largely out of classical organizational theory based on bureaucracy and hierarchical structuring, are being increasingly recognized as inaccurate descriptions of their organizational mechanisms. More promising are the newer perspectives of schools as "loosely coupled systems" (Weick, 1976) or even, perhaps, as "organized anarchies" (Cohen and others, 1972). Data collected in A Study of Schooling regarding the working environment of teachers clearly reinforces these perspectives (Tye, 1981). Most important, it is a good first step simply to recognize that schools do not always function in a rational, goal-based fashion. Once this is internalized, the current research findings and recommendations regarding the successes and failures of program change and innovation in schools are understandable. Consider, for example, the "lawn party" hypothesis put forth by Farrar and others (1980) and the process of "mutual adaptation" derived from the Rand study of educational change (Berman and McLaughlin, 1975). The message that ultimately comes through is clear: wholesale adoptions of ready-made packages are far less likely to succeed than are more general ideas *adapted* by local peo-

ple to meet the special needs of their schools. This lesson was learned time and again in the five-year IDEA study on educational change. (See Williams, 1978, for a cogent synthesis and commentary on both the Rand and IDEA studies.) In essence, then, the people directly responsible for utilizing the appraisal system (primarily teachers) must have a sense of ownership of the system and a commitment to make it work.

*The Content of Context.* The definition of "context" must also be tailored to the needs and interests of the school, district, and community. Certainly there will emerge a commonality of substance in the system that has general applicability. Formative assessment of achievement is clearly an essential task of the system. But, as we have attempted to argue, these measures are of diminished utility when not accompanied by systemic understandings gained through appraisals in other contextual areas of schooling.

Notwithstanding a common core of contextual information, school differences do exist. If they were not of some consequence for school improvement, schools could merely look to other research and adopt prepackaged organization patterns and instructional strategies designed to produce the ends they desire, ignoring the particulars about their own schools. We know, however, that the particulars of schools and the people in them do differ and these differences are powerful mediating influences on educational practice. Ultimately, the selection of contextual variables can only be accomplished by local needs assessment and value clarification. All such decisions, of course, should be regarded as tentative, subject to modifications based upon experience with the system.

*Useability.* The system must be both useable and used. It will probably be of little value to feed back results of multiple regression analyses to classroom teachers, even though such results may be useful in the district's research division. Even worse, is not to feed back results at all, or, if they are fed back, not soon enough. Nothing will kill off an innovation sooner than intra-actability and over-sophistication.

But it need not be simplistic. For example, novel methods of reporting

individual and class achievement progress to teachers can be used beyond the simple array of percentage correct scores. (See the student-problem matrix approach developed by Sato, 1980.) On the other hand, it has been the experience of A Study of Schooling project staff that productive group evaluation sessions can be achieved simply by feeding back aggregated responses to key interview and survey questions regarding the array of contextual information described above. The DDAE model—dialogue, decision, action, and evaluation—developed over the course of the Study of Educational Change and School Improvement project with the League of Cooperating Schools (Bentzen, 1974) will prove very useful as a formative evaluation technique utilizing the feedback of contextual data as initial stimuli. Most important, feedback must be organized in digestible fashion for the professionals at the building level.

*Resources.* At some point, fantasy ends and reality begins. The boundary becomes clarified only as the pieces of the system are sifted out by the screen of values and needs of the local school and community. An appraisal system composed of ordinary achievement monitoring plus once-a-year short surveys of parents, teachers, and students could probably be managed at the building level without any additional resources. But even this attenuated version of the system would require strong principal support and a small task force willing to spend the time necessary for designing the system, conducting the surveys, and tabulating and documenting the results.

It would be foolish, however, for us to suggest that a more comprehensive version could be implemented with the resources ordinarily available at the building level. That is not to say, however, that most of the talent is not available at the building level. With some technical assistance (*not* intervention), strong leadership, a committed staff, and extra funding, a more inclusive contextual appraisal system could be implemented by individual schools. In California, for example, the School Improvement Program offers the perfect vehicle for this proposal. Working through their district and site

councils (made up of teachers, students, and parents), a school can receive a modest one-year planning grant that, if accepted by the state, leads to substantial additional funding.

A strong district commitment (in spirit and dollars) is even better. A moderately-sized district should be able to manage the system with at least a "director of research and evaluation," several staff (including a curriculum and learning specialist), computer support, and enough teacher release time for inservice training and periodic staff development workshops. In any event, a serious attempt at constructing and utilizing a comprehensive appraisal system requires an equally serious commitment of resources. Don't attempt the innovation without it.

*Technical Assistance.* As we have hinted above, we are not necessarily proposing that the innovation process be an entirely within-school phenomenon. The idea is sufficiently complex so as to benefit from (and perhaps even require) outside technical assistance and expertise, such as from the district as well as from research and development organizations, colleges and universities. We reiterate, however, that technical assistance models will work only if the process of "mutual adaptation" is internalized by the assistants and assistees.

A number of educational research and development organizations are recognizing that the time has come (really long overdue) for a serious attempt at combining the wealth of technological advances in evaluation methodology and the findings in research on schooling with the practical concerns and experience of "front-line" educators at district and school levels. The Laboratory in School and Community Education has formed a partnership of schools, districts, and school service organizations. A significant agenda item for this consortium is the further delineation and field testing of the kind of appraisal system being suggested here. The ongoing work in design and use of tests and evaluation at the Center for the Study of Evaluation is also notable. See, for example, the "quality of school" concept proposed by Baker (1981) and the penetrating case studies of Bank and Williams (1980) recounting the trials

and tribulations of districts attempting to develop, install, and maintain viable data based systems that link up testing, evaluation, and instructional practices.

So don't reinvent the wheel. A number of districts have made considerable progress on the installation of pieces of the kind of system proposed here, but primarily those related to monitoring objective-referenced learning progress. See, for example, the reports by teachers, principals, and district staff that emerged from a recent NIE conference on evaluation and assessment (Stalford, 1980); the "quality of life" concept adapted by the Oregon Department of Education in conceptualizing a



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redesign of their evaluation system (Bigelow and others, in press); and the mastery learning systems being developed in many parts of the nation (for example, Bloom, 1980; Spady, 1981).

Clearly, this has not been a "cookbook" for practitioners. Were we to have attempted this kind of approach, we would have, in our opinion, been grossly irresponsible. We have not, nor have any others, attempted to develop and use a contextual appraisal system. Rather, we have conducted a research study and, as a direct result, have developed a more systematic conceptualization of what we are calling a contextual appraisal system. What we offer here is a beginning heuristic for such a system—food for

thought, as it were, the same food we would begin digesting were we to face the actual task.

Yes, it probably is "madness." But there is a little madness in all serious innovations (and innovators). We have a firm commitment to the principle of "information before action" and, therefore, to the value of accumulated knowledge bases describing schools that are a cut above the ordinary "folklore" on which action is often based. If school people could share this commitment and see an information system as a generic part of the educative process itself—not as another superfluous add-on—the experiment may not only prove feasible, it might very well prove successful. ■

<sup>1</sup> We shied away from the term "evaluation" in the title of this report only because of its various connotations and ambiguities of meaning among professional educators and the public. "Appraisal" is just one of the many synonyms for "evaluation" and, for our purposes here, is adequately defined by Stake (1967) as a two-fold interactive process of *description* and *judgment*. Our emphasis in this report will clearly be on the first component of this process.

<sup>2</sup> The considerable work of sociolinguists and cognitive anthropologists on the interaction between cultural differences and the schooling experience documents this area as essential in assessing classroom experiences and achievement outcomes of students from various cultural groups. See, for example, the collection of articles in the following volumes: Cazden, John, and Hymes, *The Functions of Language in the Classroom* and Abrahams and Troike, *Language and Cultural Diversity in American Education*.

<sup>3</sup> Pertinent studies are Wright's (1980) analysis of teacher, student, and observer perceptions of instructional processes in the classroom; Bauch's (1981) analysis of the relationship between teachers' beliefs and instructional behaviors; Sirotnik's (1981b) analysis of intended and unintended learning as inferred from observational summaries; Klein's (1980) analyses of state and district curriculum guides; and Benham's (unpublished) analyses of teacher supplied curriculum materials.

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