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# Evaluation for Schools

CLIVE B. KINGS

## The Need for Evaluation

This article serves as an introduction to evaluation in schools.

Four considerations have been borne in mind in the development of this article.

- Firstly, in Singapore schools a *Self Appraisal Report* has to be written for the Ministry of Education. In more universal parlance this is tantamount to evaluating the curriculum and those organisational functions that impact on curriculum and student learning. It is asserted that specific evaluations can contribute to the enrichment of such a report.
- Secondly, teachers are now more frequently seeking advice about how they might investigate and seek solutions to particular problems in their schools, for example, such things as underachievement in mathematics by a particular group of students, the value of the silent reading programme or the appropriateness of the teaching-learning strategies used with the new normal technical stream in secondary schools.
- Thirdly, the external environmental influences such as technology and business demands as well as the internal changes in the school, the types of students and staff employed, all point to the importance of evaluating programmes, teaching-learning and assessment strategies to ensure that the various dimensions of curriculum are in step with the learning environment.
- Fourthly, and most importantly, I believe that all teachers are always evaluating, whether consciously or unconsciously. I would further assert that *all* teachers should be actively involved in manageable evaluations as a basis of improvement in professional practice.

I would stress that the considerations underscoring the need for more explicit evaluations to be undertaken in schools is not only relevant in Singapore but in all cultural contexts.

The literature abounds with articles about evaluation from such researchers as Stake (1973, 1975), MacDonald (1971, 1976), Shadish et al. (1991) and Owen (1993). Much of the theory, and many of the evaluation frameworks and skills are taught in various university courses. However, teachers are often still reluctant to engage in evaluative exercises. There are a number of reasons for this.

- Firstly, teachers often perceive evaluation as esoteric, academic, daunting, very time consuming and unrelated to professional practice.
- Secondly, many evaluations, diligently carried out, for one reason or another have often not fulfilled their original promise, have been perfunctory or have been totally unproductive.
- A third but real reason for some teachers not carrying out evaluations is that they simply do not have the skills to undertake evaluations even if these have been discussed in theoretical terms in teacher education and in-service courses. This is often because these courses, but not all, are perceived to be *about* evaluation rather than learning the skills of *engaging in* evaluation and *actually undertaking* an evaluation. The problem is compounded by the fact that many teachers would like to have a series of systematic steps to follow in undertaking an evaluation, .i.e. to engage in a mechanical approach to evaluation. However, it is important to understand that undertaking an evaluation involves proactive decision making about what has to be evaluated, who will be involved in the evaluation, how the evaluation will be carried out and how it will be reported.

Given the above considerations, many teachers are reluctant to undertake evaluation exercises. The crux of the matter is that teachers have generally not perceived evaluation as part of their role prescription. It is therefore proposed in this article to highlight some

considerations for improvement of evaluation practices. I would first describe the nature of the evaluation under discussion.

## Defining Evaluation

Because of the cultural confusions in using the terms *evaluation* and *assessment* I would like to clarify that the term *assessment* is used in the context of this discussion exclusively in terms of the *assessment of student performance*, which obviously may contribute to the information base of *evaluation*. We can define evaluation as the collection of information to make decisions about resources, facilities, programmes or teaching facilities. Scriven (1967) has distinguished between *formative* and *summative evaluation*. These different kinds of evaluation can be summarised as:

- *formative evaluation* (after Cronbach, 1962-63) which provides for programme development or improvement; and
- *summative evaluation* which provides a more final assessment of a programme which may help those who have not been involved with the programme development decide whether they will adopt the programme.

In this series of articles I shall focus on *formative assessment* rather than *summative assessment*. This is because formative evaluation can have a major role in contributing to a process of continuous improvement in teaching and learning practice and is part of what has become known as *Total Quality Management*. This article has been written to be of practical use to teachers based on the author's experience. It is clear that the literature on evaluation is extensive and provides much more detail than will be considered here.

The following are some of the important considerations which should be taken into account in the development of evaluations of programmes or elements of programmes.

## Using An Appropriate Futuristic Framework for Evaluation

In devising an evaluation it is important to address the issue of setting the evaluation within the context of change. It is clear that schools have everchanging and shifting populations and students with changing needs. In Singapore schools have to accommodate to changes in policies as the result of the implementation of the new normal technical stream and the setting up of autonomous schools. In the external environment of the school we also need to recognise the changing community, new requirements for the world of work, a strengthening economy, the impacts of changing technologies and globalisation. All of these factors need to be taken into account in devising any evaluation process. Given this situation, 'How do we go about an evaluation?'

When one reviews the literature it becomes clear that there is no particular methodological formalization for undertaking evaluations (Westbury, 1970; Kings, 1977). Evaluators have generally focused on the provision of strategies to undertake the task rather than theories for interpreting phenomena. The lack of mechanical procedural steps and systematic application of evaluation instruments is often bewildering to the teacher who is unskilled in evaluation.

Graham and Kings (1992) summarise the situation as follows:

The grandiose vision of the contributions that evaluators could make to educational practice is now less emphasised. With the passage of time there has developed a greater acceptance of the shift away from the use of a few psychometric measures to an approach which incorporates a broader range of procedures and techniques. There has been general disillusionment (Cronbach, 1962:163; Atkin, 1967:168) with the Tylerian pre-ordinate evaluation model (Tyler, 1949). This prompted Stake (1967) to propose a broadening of evaluation. Since that time others have proposed such schemes as illuminative evaluation (Parlett and Hamilton), goal-free evaluation (Scriven, 1972), value-free evaluation (House, 1974), holistic evaluation (MacDonald 1971, 1976), responsive evaluation (Stake, 1973, 1975) and evaluation in naturalistic settings (Smolitz, 1975). (p. 147)

Thus evaluations should be future-oriented and proactive. Curriculum evaluation should not be based solely on given goals or programme objectives as this would be unlikely to engender any really significant change in strategy or quality, and even then change would only be within a narrowly prescribed framework. Dynamic evaluation for change must be responsive to significant issues and contingencies that are part of the changing environment (Graham & Kings, 1992).

Thus the Ministry of Education has to review curriculum guidelines. At another level schools have to address the requirements of their appraisal reports, and at yet another level again teachers need to evaluate the implementation of curriculum. Evaluation at these different levels needs further elaboration. What it is essential to note is that evaluations need to be undertaken against a backdrop of external and internal environmental factors if real progress is to be realised in enhancement of student learning. The examples are manifold. Consider the use of an English programme, might it not be appropriate to include an evaluation objective related to the discriminative use of television in today's world, and might it not be sensible to check there is an objective related to assessment of the impact of fast foods in a nutrition programme?

*Changes in the external and the internal environments can potentially influence aspects of the curriculum and this necessitates a review of the goals/objectives to be addressed in any evaluation. This is essential in any worthwhile evaluation.*

## **Ensuring there is Something to Evaluate**

Presumably if we want to evaluate something it becomes more worthwhile if we have something we are trying to improve. We can develop a strategy for improvement and then we can evaluate the effectiveness of using that strategy. There is little value of looking at the *status quo* as this only provides a description of what is. In this case we engage in what has become known as *action research* (e.g. Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). However, it is sometimes imperative to establish clearly the needs of students and in this case we should do a *needs analysis* in order to develop and implement, for example,

more effective teaching and learning strategies.

*What is of paramount importance is to ensure that the evaluation is significant and provide greater understanding which in turn will lead to some improvement in practice, however small.*

### **Clarity of Focus and Relating to Student Learning**

It is common for evaluations to be too broad and unfocussed. What normally happens is that the outcomes are vague, perfunctory or virtually useless. To avoid these pitfalls it is essential to identify one or two key purposes of the evaluation and to ensure that the evaluation is focussed on the essential function of schools, the enhancement of student learning. We need to be clear in say, the evaluation of student reading, which of the following questions needs to be addressed:

- 1 Do we want to know how many books students borrow? in English, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil or all of these?
- 2 Do we want to know from where students borrow these books?
- 3 Do we want to know how many students read these books?
- 4 Do we want to know if students understand what they read in these books?
- 5 Do we want to know if students are interested in reading these books?

There clearly many other questions that can be asked. The focus of each question has different implications for the implementation of change strategies and for any evaluation.

Consider the following ways of achieving a better focus in any evaluation.

- Clarify from those who are involved in what is being evaluated,

from their various perspectives what it is that they want to get out of the evaluation. It is important to focus on what is really intended.

- Identify clearly how the evaluation impacts or will impact on student learning. Remember that even if we do an evaluation of some aspect of the library as a resource it is argued that the focus should be on how students' learning can be enhanced. For example, if students are unable to achieve a quality project it could be because they are lazy, incapable, have not received clear guidelines about the use of resources, are unable to access the library at suitable times, are unable to retrieve appropriate information, are unable to select information or there are no resources available. To just look at the library resources in isolation would be meaningless if there is not more supporting evidence.

While it can be argued that objectives may have limitations in curriculum design and evaluation, there is a strong case for ensuring that there are some clear signposts or objectives for the evaluation as one is more likely to identify unintended outcomes.

## **Level of the Evaluation**

Attention needs to be given to the level or pitch of the evaluation. Take the following examples:

- Before establishing the level of staff skills in using computers it may be more important to first establish the availability of computers for staff use.
- Before doing a detailed evaluation of listening skills it may be more important to get some anecdotal impressions of students' listening skill problems.

Judgments have to be made about where to start the evaluation process, and upon this will depend the types of procedures and techniques to be used and who will be involved. In some cases evaluation may involve relatively simple procedures and involve

minimal time, although the effectiveness of the evaluation will clearly depend on who is involved in the process. Each phase of evaluation should be considered as a cycle of the action research process in which change is implemented, evaluated, changed/refined, evaluated and so on.

## Data for Evaluation

It is perhaps unfortunate that evaluation has often erroneously been associated with the use of elaborate questionnaires and endless interviewing, the result of which is the laborious and time consuming collation of data which can be out-of-date by the time it is available in a report. The result is that it cannot be used for decision making. It is therefore important for us to recognise that there is an abundance of readily available information in any school which we might be able to use before collecting any further data. We should also recognise that there are more valid and more efficient techniques for the collection of data than the use of long questionnaires.

### Readily Available Data

We need to consider what some readily available data might be. These data can include documents such as minutes of meetings and records of attendance. In addition they can include assessment of student performance: examinations, tests, projects journals and other relevant procedures. These can be considered in the context of relevant evaluation objectives.

### Using Techniques to Provide Quick Feedback

It is also true that there are more reliable forms of data that might be used which can be very quickly generated. These could include such approaches as using information from teachers' diaries, summaries of informal meetings and informal feedback from students. We can also use such procedures such as structured discussions *nominal group technique* or *Delphi technique*.

### Focussing the Instruments

Where we do use questionnaires or interviews, structured or unstructured, it is important to be conscious of making them very focussed and to ensure that the feedback is manageable.

### Timing of Evaluation

It is argued that evaluation should be built into the action plan and ensure that appropriate feedback is provided at all points in the evaluation phase, so that appropriate change can be effective.

### Ownership

It is important to recognise that if there is to be effective change it is imperative that the organisation should be involved with the evaluation, especially where it is formative in nature. Participants in the design and implementation are more likely to feel less threatened and to ensure that improvements are implemented. Thus from the outset all participant must be involved. This will ensure that people have a positive attitude to the evaluation. Don't we all want to invest in better practice?

## Conclusion

The case has been made for closer attention to formative evaluation in schools. However, it has been acknowledged that teachers have not always easily accommodated to the evaluation role necessary to ensure enhancement of evaluation practices.

It has been argued that formative evaluation is a continuous process which should be developed within a futuristic framework. It is also important to ensure that evaluations are worthwhile and would lead to significant changes that will have impact on learners. It is imperative to focus an evaluation by clarifying the goals and objectives.

In summary, it is important to devise a plan which can be implemented within the current resource base, that is, within the time and other resources available and utilising existing personnel. This is

usually a reality unless special resource provisions are made available. For this reason and to ensure the impact of evaluation, greater emphasis should be given to the use of an action research model.

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