

An Educative, Values-Engaged Approach to Evaluation*

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PRELUDE

An educative values-engaged approach to program evaluation blends elements of responsiveness (Abma and Stake, 2001; Stake, 1973/1987, 2004) with an active engagement with values that are drawn principally from democratic and culturally-responsive traditions in evaluation (Hood, 1998; House and Howe, 1999; MacDonald, 1977). This evaluation approach has two fundamental commitments:

- 1. To evaluation as an **educative practice**, that is, as an opportunity for people involved in an educational program to learn about the particular characteristics of the program being evaluated and how those characteristic contribute to high quality education in the context being studied.*
- 2. To evaluation as an **opportunity for engaging with critical values** related to education, including values like motivation, access, and inclusion, and with special attention to democratic values of equity.*

In this paper, I will describe key elements of the conceptual framework and justification for an educative, values-engaged approach to evaluation, and then illustrate this approach with excerpts from an example. But, first I would like to locate these ideas within existing traditions in evaluation, because new directions are always rooted in the wisdom and experience of old directions.

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Existing Evaluation Traditions

One useful way to describe existing evaluation traditions or theories is in terms of the distinctive purposes and audiences that evaluation can serve. An audience is those whose interests are being addressed in the evaluation. Table 1 provides one way to cluster evaluation purposes and audiences, along with the evaluation approaches and methodologies characteristic of each.

Table 1 Clusters of Evaluation Approaches

Purpose	Primary Audience	Evaluation Approach	Methodology	Representative theorists
To provide decision support, to address accountability needs	Policy makers and other decision makers	Comparative, causal, decision-oriented evaluation	Large-scale quantitative methodologies, often experimental or survey	Donald Campbell Thomas Cook Bob Boruch
To provide information useful of program improvement or organizational learning.	Program managers and administrators	Utilization-oriented evaluation	Various methodologies, chosen on practical grounds	Michael Patton Marvin Alkin
To generate a deep, rich understanding of the program and its quality of design and implementation	Program staff	Responsive evaluation	Case study and other qualitative methodologies	Robert Stake Lee Cronbach
To catalyze democratizing social critique or social change	Those with least powers, those the program is designed to serve	Participatory and democratic evaluation	Various methodologies, chosen on ideological ground	Ernest House Bessa Whitmore

The educative, values-engaged evaluation approach is primarily a blend of the third and fourth clusters. With this approach, we seek contextual understanding of a program's democratic potential. With this approach, we also offer a comprehensive view of evaluation, resisting narrow accountability demands that equate evaluation with standardized achievement test scores. This approach clearly builds on many of the principles of responsive evaluation, including (a) a belief in the importance of context in shaping the experiences and quality of an educational program, and (b) a commitment to surfacing the plurality of values that stakeholders hold about an educational program and to engaging with these values in an open and respectful way.

Now, what is distinctive about the educative, values-engaged approach to evaluation? First, this approach seeks to be inclusive and respectful of multiple, diverse values (like responsive evaluation), but also to attend in particular to democratic values of equity, drawing from democratic traditions in evaluation. This is extremely important in American society today, which remains burdened by radical inequities, resulting from continuing discrimination and prejudice. Second, this evaluation approach intentionally incorporates other good ideas in contemporary evaluation theory and practice, notably, the use of program theory. Third, we are also intentionally incorporating the use of multiple methodological traditions into our evaluation approach, primarily in the form of mixed methods approaches to evaluation design.

Conceptual Framework and Justification

As noted, the educative, values-engaged approach is a blend of responsive and democratic traditions in evaluation. As such, it emphasizes particular evaluative purposes, commitments, processes, and evaluator roles *rather than* particular designs and methodologies. Again this evaluation approach is grounded in two inter-related fundamental commitments: (1) to evaluation as an educative practice or as an opportunity for important learning about the character and quality of the program being evaluated, and (2) to evaluation as a forum for engaging with critical values. So, in terms of evaluation purpose, this approach focuses primarily on generating a deep understanding of the program and its potential to contribute to democratic equity.

Evaluation as Educative

As an educative practice, this evaluation approach promotes learning about the particular contextual character and contours of meaningful, high quality, effective social and educational programs.

Envisioning evaluation as fundamentally educative, positioning evaluation in society as an educational endeavor, thinking of evaluators as educators – these are Lee J. Cronbach’s most significant and profound contributions to the theory and practice of evaluation. In a very influential book written by Lee Cronbach and his colleagues in 1980 – a book called *Toward Reform of Program Evaluation* – the authors started the book and organized their argument around 95 theses. Several of these theses speak to evaluation’s educative role:

- ◆ The evaluator is an educator; his [or her] success is to be judged by what others learn.
- ◆ Program evaluation is a process by which society learns about itself.
- ◆ Program evaluation should contribute to enlightened discussion of alternative plans for social action.

Cronbach was not primarily interested in advancing a particular methodology for evaluation. Rather, he believed that many different methods could and should be selected in service of generating comprehensive understandings of program challenge and promise in varied contexts. These understandings could importantly illuminate key features of the contexts that matter for this particular social or educational program and key features of the program that appear to be effective, or promising, or perhaps miss the mark. With thoughtful review and open discussion and critique of accumulated understandings across studies, argued Cronbach, society could develop important insights into the character of our most enduring and challenging social and educational problems and into the kinds of interventions that offer hope and promise of providing some effective responses to these problems. Program evaluation thereby contributes to enlightened discussion of alternative plans for social action, and program evaluation becomes a process by which society learns about itself (Greene, 2004; and see also Carol Weiss’s conceptualization of evaluation for enlightenment, Weiss, 1998). This is what we mean by an educative evaluation

approach. Two additional facets of this approach are the importance of context and the value of program theory.

The Importance of Context. In this approach, local context is viewed as importantly constituting the particular character of an educational program. An educational program is not just located in a particular context, but is importantly shaped by that context. So, understanding local context is central to understanding program quality, and contextual factors must be incorporated into the evaluation design, analysis and reporting.

Moreover, most approaches to educational program evaluation work to assess how well students perform in the program being evaluated, and this is clearly important. In addition, in the values-engaged approach, evaluations assess how well the program “performs” in a particular context, or how well it fits the people and their expectations, the culture, the daily rhythms and routines, the stresses and tensions of the particular learning context at hand – in terms of the program’s design, implementation, and impact (Greene, 2004; Greene, Millett, and Hopson, 2004; Kushner, 2000). This is one of the important ways in which this evaluation approach focuses on equity. Children cannot learn well in a program that is not designed to fit their needs.

The Usefulness Program Theory. In this evaluation approach, a program theory lens can usefully illuminate localized, contextual program understanding. Program theory is the logic of a program’s design, or why a particular set of resources and activities would be expected to lead to some particular outcomes. The use of program theory in evaluation has both a long and more recent history. As early as the early 1970s, Carol Weiss (Weiss, 1972) was promoting a program theory perspective in evaluation, and her work continues to do so. Weiss (2000) describes the purpose of *theory-based evaluation* (TBE) as testing “the links between what programs assume their activities are accomplishing and what actually happens at each small step along the way.... TBE is an effort to examine the mechanisms by which programs influence successive stages of participants’ behavior” (p. 35). Mechanisms are underlying causal processes or *how* a given educational program leads to particular outcomes of learning. Weiss emphasizes the importance of surfacing the multiple program theories that exist in a context, highlighting the educative

value of bringing multiple stakeholders together to talk about their respective versions of the program's theory of change. Consensus in such a forum is not necessarily expected, as funders, policy makers, program directors, practitioners, and consumers "derive [their program understandings] from radically different perspectives" (Weiss, 1972, p. 15). So, multiple program theories can be inclusively and constructively engaged in evaluation.

And so, the primary point of a program theory lens in this evaluation approach is to help various stakeholders articulate their own assumptions, perspectives, interests, and values regarding a particular program, for example, how and why they believe a given activity will lead to successful learning for students in that context and how they define successful learning. These various stakeholder theories can then be used by the evaluator as opportunities for dialogue and exchange, learning and critique. Contrasting or conflicting theories can be fertile ground to clarify program purposes, refine processes, or revise policies. And again, by providing space for the surfacing of multiple program theories and for the questioning of program theory assumptions for their relevance and meaningfulness to the special and unique characteristics of the children in that context, this evaluation approach can engage with values of equity. (See also Donaldson, 2003; Pawson and Tilly, 1997; Rogers, Petrosino, Huebner, and Hacsí, 2000.)

Evaluation as Values-Engaged

Under the second fundamental commitment, this approach to evaluation promotes an active engagement with critical values inherently connected to teaching and learning in educational contexts, as well as values related to equity and social justice.

Evaluators have always attended to values in evaluation, as evaluation is fundamentally the assessment of quality or "goodness", though more often descriptively than prescriptively (Shadish, Cook, and Leviton, 1991). In our approach, we first aim to *inclusively* engage and describe diverse stakeholders' values related to the educational program being evaluated, that is, values related to the educational content and curricula and to teaching and learning. Some stakeholders, for example, may prefer teacher-directed instruction for science classes because they believe it can most effectively enhance student mastery of content knowledge, which they value most highly. Other stakeholders may

support problem-based learning because they believe it advances students' scientific reasoning skills and motivation to learn more science, which are outcomes they value most highly. Beyond description, our evaluation approach also seeks to prescribe evaluative engagement with the particular democratic values of equity, notably advancing the interests and well being of traditionally under-served individuals and groups. In our society, these include people from low-income families, people who are racial and ethnic minorities, people who are disabled, and, in some domains of education like science and mathematics, girls and women. In sum, our values-engaged evaluation approach aspires to be both inclusive and especially attentive to core democratic values of equity.

A Commitment to Inclusion. That is, in values-engaged evaluation, the interests and perspectives of *all* legitimate stakeholders are included. Stakeholder inclusion in evaluation is part of a long tradition, justified by its links to utilization, its contributions to more comprehensive program understanding, *and* because such inclusion is more democratic – more pluralistic, more equitable, more just (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Hood, 1998; House and Howe, 1999; MacDonald, 1976; Mertens, 1999; Stake, 2004; Whitmore, 1998).

A Commitment to Equity. Alongside our commitment to inclusion of multiple and diverse stakeholder perspectives and experiences, this approach to evaluation has an additional commitment to equity. With this commitment, this evaluation approach seeks to use the forum of evaluation to examine and analyze how well the educational program serves the interests of those not well served in our society, often the poor, the minorities, the immigrants, the disabled. It is not enough to ask if a given educational program is successful on the average. We must ask if it advances the interests and well being of those on the margins of our society. And this concern may well be distinctive to the American context at this time.

Summary. In sum, “values engagement” in our evaluation approach refers to the central role that values play in evaluation and to the *responsibility* of the evaluator to promote an active engagement with values. From the framing of the evaluation questions to the development of an evaluation design and methods, and from the interactions of

stakeholders in the evaluation process to the especially important task of making judgments of program quality, values – about teaching and learning in context – will be centrally featured. Engagement thus suggests a kind of quiet insistence that questions of value be addressed throughout the evaluation, at every turn and decision point.

An Illustration

Madison Primary School is similar to many urban schools in the U.S. today, in terms of demographics that over-represent racial and ethnic minorities and children from low-income families, a history of inadequate educational resources, and persistent challenges of effective teaching and learning. The achievement scores of Madison's students have not met state standards for the last three years, so Madison Primary School is currently required to undertake a significant school reform effort. For this purpose, this year Madison is implementing a new curriculum in mathematics and language arts – one that features considerable group work by students, innovative use of technology, and integration of mathematics and reading and writing into other areas of the curriculum. How would an educative, values-engaged evaluator approach an evaluation of Madison's school reform endeavor?

Community and Program Description

A very important first step in developing an evaluation plan for the Madison school reform evaluation is to better understand the particular characteristics of this school community *and of* the design and implementation of the reform initiative. Learning about this particular school community – its uniqueness, its complexities, and its continuing and dynamic evolution – is fundamental to developing an evaluation plan that holds promise of generating meaningful information. As well, learning about the design and rationale for the school reform program being implemented in Madison is also fundamental to developing an evaluation plan that has educative potential.

We may learn, for example, that the Madison school community has been experiencing considerable transience and turnover in recent years, that a growing community of English-language learners from various parts of the world are showing up at the school, and that there are rumored promises of a new automobile factory to be built near the Madison community.

We may also learn that the student-focused pedagogical philosophy of the reform program being implemented in Madison is quite different from the teacher-directed teaching philosophy of most Madison teachers, while the reliance on technology is highly consistent with Madison norms and practices.

Spending valuable evaluative time on developing an accurate and thoughtful understanding of just what is being evaluated in this particular context anchors the development of meaningful and potentially useful evaluation questions. It also reflects some of the value commitments of this educative, values-engaged evaluation approach, specifically:

- * *A commitment to **contextuality**, to understanding the character of the program to be evaluated in its particular and unique context*
- * *A commitment to **inclusion** of all legitimate stakeholder views and perspectives on the issues in the evaluation, with special efforts to include the more marginalized people in the context (House and Howe, 1999) – perhaps, in this particular school community, anxious teachers and transient families*

In the educative, values-engaged evaluation plan to be developed in this context, considerable space is allocated to this description of just what is being evaluated and its distinctive characteristics. This description, that is, provides the contextual anchor and justification for the evaluation plan that is developed.

Key Evaluation Questions

The next step in evaluating the school reform effort at Madison Primary School with an educative, values-engaged approach would be to develop key questions the evaluation will address. This involves an iterative process of document review, observations, and discussions and interviews with multiple stakeholders – as inclusively as possible – about their key experiences and concerns regarding Madison’s reform initiative. Ideally, this process would include teachers and parents, school and district administrators, specialists in Madison’s reform curriculum, and others.

For example, this process in Madison may have generated the following key issues related to the school reform program:

- ◆ The Madison reform curriculum is being questioned by teachers and parents alike for its relevance to their children and for its power to enable meaningful learning by the children, especially learning in language arts and mathematics (the core subjects of state tests). Of special concern in the curriculum are the technology components and the small group instruction. How can my child learn well in a group, wonder some parents. How will his or her unique needs be met through a lot of group instruction and group work?
- ◆ Teachers and parents are further especially concerned about the relevance and effectiveness of the curriculum in meeting the needs of English language learners and students with special needs.
- ◆ District personnel are most committed to raising the test scores of participating students. School personnel are equally concerned about student test performance, especially on state tests.

From these kinds of stakeholder concerns, the evaluator at Madison would draft some initial evaluation questions for review and then revision. These could include the following:

Overall question:

In what ways and to what extent does the educational reform program at Madison Primary School meet the important educational needs of the children and families served by this school, in particular the distinctive needs of English language learners, children from racial and ethnic minority groups, children from low-income families, and children with special needs? And in what ways and to what extent does the theory and implementation of the program support this primary educational mission?

Sub-questions:

1. What is the *quality of the educational program* offered at Madison Primary School for this particular community of children and families?
 - ◆ How well prepared and supported are Madison teachers to implement the reform program with high educational quality in this school?

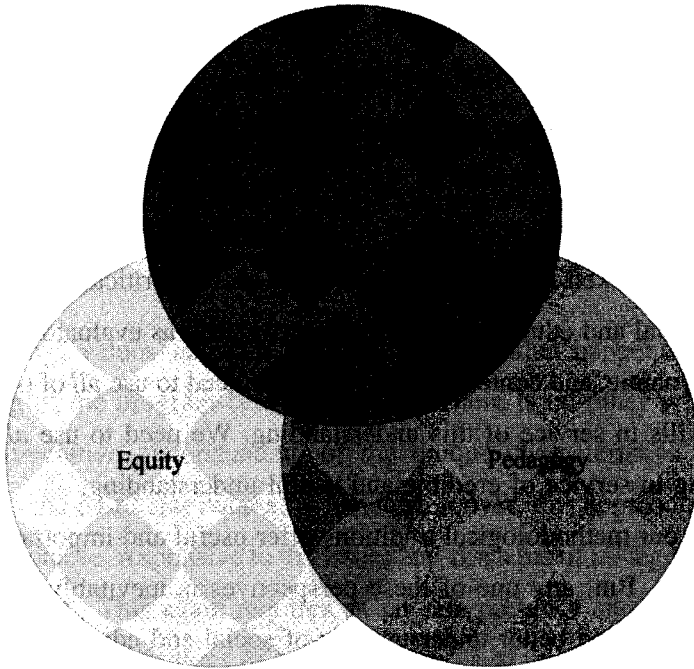
- ◆ What are parent and guardian perceptions of the school's educational quality, and how do these perceptions relate to parental commitment to the school?
2. To what extent and in what ways are the children at Madison *attaining meaningful and valued educational outcomes*?
- ◆ To what extent does the reform program provide sufficient and appropriate instructional time and practice on basic skills in language arts and math for all children in the school, especially those with histories of low achievement? And how does this relate to children's mastery and achievement in these core subject areas?

Establishing the Criteria for Making Judgments of Program Quality

A final "front end" facet of evaluation concerns the criteria to be used to make judgments of program quality. In an educative, values-engaged approach to evaluation, these criteria are not assumed but rather are established through discussions with diverse stakeholders, in tandem with relevant external perspectives contributed by the evaluator. Moreover, discussions about quality criteria are an especially important site for stakeholder inclusion, as criteria can and should engage and reflect the multiplicity of cherished values and ideals in the context at hand.

While specific criteria for judging program quality must be established in each context, a general framework for thinking about program quality in our educative, values-engaged evaluation approach is the following. In this approach, a high quality educational program is one that operates at the intersection of (a) sound educational content, with (b) appropriate pedagogy, that (c) well serves *all* of the children in the at context, especially those that are often not well served. This framework is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. A framework for defining program quality



There are many examples of programs that operate in two of these three circles. For example, a program may focus on critical reading skills well established in the research literature and use generally effective teaching techniques, but neither of these connect to the low-income or minority populations being served (content and pedagogy). Or a program may focus on the particular skills needed by the low-income or English language learner population being served, but use teaching techniques that do not engage or motivate this particular population of learners (content and equity). Or a program may feature teaching and learning strategies that do work well for diverse kinds of learners, but the content is outdated or not research-based or not well matched to the needs of these learners (pedagogy and equity). Our evaluation approaches judges quality at the intersection of all three of these circles, as relevant to and defined by each local context.

Only after these front-end processes would the educative, values-engaged evaluator develop the evaluation design and methods. That is, most of what is distinctive about this

approach relates to these front end activities. In terms of design and methods, what is distinctive about this approach is its commitment to a mixed methodology.

Thinking About Design and Methods

A mixed methods approach to evaluation design intentionally incorporates a diversity or mix of methodological traditions (qualitative, quantitative, participatory, feminist, critical, action-oriented, and so forth) in order to generate a better understanding of what is being studied. A mixed methods approach rests on two critical assumptions.

1. The social and educational phenomena we seek as evaluators to understand are very complex, dynamic, and contextual. We therefore need to use *all* of our methodological expertise and skills in service of this understanding. We need to use *all* of our multiple ways of knowing in service of credible and useful understanding.

2. All of our methodological traditions offer useful and important perspectives on human phenomena. But, any one of these perspectives is inevitably partial and limited. So, a more complete and better understanding of social and educational phenomena can be obtained by the intentional and respectful incorporation of multiple methodological perspectives.

To explore these mixed methods ideas, I will present five specific purposes for mixing methods, which represent five different forms of “better understanding” that can be obtained with a mixed methods design (Greene, Caracelli, and Graham, 1989).

1. **Triangulation.** The use of two different methods, each assessing the same phenomenon, with intentions of results that converge or corroborate one another, toward enhanced validity or credibility of results.

2. **Complementarity.** The use of two different methods, each assessing a different facet of a single complex phenomenon, toward broader, deeper, and more comprehensive understanding of that phenomenon.

3. **Development.** The use of the results of one method to help develop a second method, where development is broadly construed to include sampling and implementation, as well as actual instrument construction.

4. **Initiation.** The use of two different methods, each assessing the same complex

phenomenon, with intentions of results that do not converge, but rather diverge in interesting and provocative ways that require further investigation toward new and generative insights.

5. **Expansion.** The use of more than one method to extend the range and scope of a study, where different methods are used for different phenomena.

A mixed methods approach to evaluation design also respects difference and diversity and thus is a good fit to our educative, values-engaged evaluation approach.

Reflections

An educative, values-engaged approach to evaluation happens close-up, in and around the setting of the program being evaluated. There is no other way to develop an accurate and appreciative understanding of the unique characteristics of the program being evaluated in the particular context at hand. Moreover, this approach to evaluation is fundamentally responsive, responsive to the issues and concerns of *all* legitimate stakeholder groups in that context. This again requires an on-site presence and an ear keenly tuned to the multiple and diverse rhythms of lived experiences in this particular community. An educative, values-engaged approach is also fundamentally educative, aspiring to provide spaces and places for thoughtful, data-informed reflections on practice, in this case, on curricula, teaching, learning, and the distinctive educational needs of diverse kinds of children.

We believe that evaluation is a public good, and evaluators have public responsibilities to contribute credible and relevant information to ongoing public conversations about important public issues, public policy priorities and democratic ideals, in this case, educational quality for our urban schools. We envision our educative, values-engaged evaluation approach as helping to create a “public space” for important engagement with ongoing issues in education (Willinsky, 2001), the most important of which is to find meaningful ways to open the doors of public education to all the creative, inventive, imaginative minds that have been heretofore been uninvited and unwelcomed.

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