

# Educational Evaluation: A Relational Perspective

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School leaders, teachers, and students from around the globe voice frustration at finding themselves increasingly enslaved by exam scores, performance targets and school rankings. While aimed primarily at institutional accountability and raising educational standards, measurement-based systems of assessment have become counter-productive for teachers and students at all levels. As frequently asserted, schools are losing the capacity to engage students in meaningful learning. In countries, such as the UK and USA, test performance has slowly become the very aim of education. With mounting pressure to attain good grades, mental health problems among students have exploded in number. Teachers also suffer from the demands of standardization and the appraisal of their performance through the test scores of their students. These are among the critiques of the dominant place of measurement-based assessment in contemporary education.

No doubt, learning necessarily involves and requires evaluation. The question is how to separate the evaluative process and practices from the above-mentioned assessment tradition so that evaluation can truly serve to motivate and enhance learning, as well as contribute to the well-being of students, teachers, and the broader community. Drawing from a social constructionist theory, the present chapter outlines and illustrates an alternative approach to testing and grades. It highlights the fundamental place of relational processes in education.

Indeed, as many see it, the measurement-based assessment model is a byproduct of a longstanding metaphor of *schools as factories*. Responding to demands of industry and government in the late 1800s, mandatory public schooling was implemented. The *factory* served as a guiding metaphor for organizing and educating large masses of people from diverse settings (Jacobs, 2014). While efficient in its operations, there was always dissatisfaction. With time, the writings of

many educational philosophers, such as Dewey (1932/1987) and Vygotsky (1962) in particular, provided an alternative vision of education, one that placed relationships at its center. There have been numerous further additions to this vision over the years, but with the emergence of constructionist dialogues on the nature of knowledge, interest in education as a social process was vitalized. Herein lay the generative context for the development of relational approaches to educational evaluation.

### EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION FROM A RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

From a relational perspective, it is within the process of relating that the world comes to be what it is for us. We draw from this process our understandings of the world, meanings, and values that inform our actions and shape our moral and ethical horizons (Gergen, 2009). Equally, it is within this process of relating that the learning process can be animated. However, traditional assessment practices, including high-stakes testing and grading, subvert this very process of relating on which education and human flourishing depend. How are we to envision the alternative? How might it be realized in practice?

Our focal interest has been illuminating meaningful forms of educational evaluation that draw strength from relational processes (Gergen and Gill, 2020). Agreeing with McNamee (2015), whose work focuses on evaluation in higher education, we refer to this orientation as *relational evaluation* or educational evaluation from a relational perspective. We have intentionally chosen the term evaluation as opposed to such terms as assessment, examination, measurement or appraisal, because the latter all carry strong connotations of independent and objective judgment.

Two key features in our conception of evaluation are highlighted here: first, its

focus on values and valuing. We emphasize evaluation as a process of valuing, or appreciating the value of something (Gitlin and Smyth, 1989). This enables us to replace the traditional focus of assessment on student deficiency – pointing to where students have fallen short of perfection – with an emphasis on potentialities, possibilities and opportunities for growth and well-being. The attempt is to build from strengths, thus fostering hope and engagement. This focus suggests that the evaluative process must privilege appreciative approaches (Cooperrider et al., 2001) and affirm the valuable aspects of the activities and experiences (Gill and Thomson, 2016). In doing so, evaluation continues to give life to learning, enhance well-being and enrich relationships central to learning. Second, it is a process of co-inquiry, that is, to inquire (into the values and valuable aspects of learning activities and experiences) with those who are involved in learning. Evaluation emerges from generative relationships amongst those who evaluate and those whose activities, experiences and practices are being evaluated. It therefore cannot simply be a fixing of a grade upon someone for a piece of work, or a judgment placed upon a person for a particular performance. Instead it must be a collaborative inquiry and even mutual inquiry where teachers and students enter into a dialogic exploration aimed at identifying and appreciating the meaningfulness of teaching and learning. Hence educational evaluation must engage those who are part of an educative activity – students, teachers, parents, administrators, and other stakeholders – in contrast to impersonal practices of measurement, as co-inquiry, evaluative inquiry and dialogue not only arise from the relationships amongst all, but, more importantly, as we shall soon see, they also serve to enrich these relationships.

Appreciating life-giving and intrinsically valuable aspects of learning also means that the evaluative inquiry should be rooted in the common recognition of the learning activity's aims and objectives, including a shared

consciousness of what is being attempted in the evaluation process and why it is important. That is to say, questioning, listening, dialogue, reflection and collaboration will seek out what motivates the students in the learning activities and experiences and how they have continued to expand their interests and passion for learning.

As we shall illustrate in this chapter, this relational orientation can be applied to evaluative practices that aim at inquiring into students' engagement with learning and teachers' professional development, as well as to the functioning of entire schools.

### **MAJOR AIMS OF RELATIONAL EVALUATION**

In their current form, assessment practices such as testing and grading primarily serve the purposes of surveillance, control, and gatekeeping of standardization. The results have been a deterioration in the learning process and the dehumanizing of its participants. In the case of relational evaluation, we seek more promising ends. Three of these are particularly central, and while overlapping and interdependent, it is helpful to consider them separately. It is also useful to link them more specifically to the relational orientation just outlined.

#### ***Evaluation to Enhance the Learning Process***

If learning (and students' development and well-being) is the primary focus of education, then forms of evaluation should not only value and promote learning, but also principally enhance the learning process(es). This means, at the outset, that evaluation should provide an opportunity for students to reflect on and appreciate the values of learning, and inspire students' engagement in the learning processes. Engagement is relational.

In other words, students' enthusiasm, curiosity, interest and care for learning tend to derive from relationships. At the heart of engagement and relationship lies values and valuing. By and large, value is co-created, often in dialogue, and when the value of an activity is appreciated by the students, they will be interested to improve learning as well, to explore and be maximally open to challenges in order to improve. Valuing and evaluation walk hand in hand.

The preceding emphasis on dialogic and collaborative evaluation is reinforced. It is in just such contexts that teachers and students can inject learning activities with value and significance. In turn, evaluative inquiry and dialogue can cultivate students' interest and curiosity, enthusiasm and care. This may mean a teacher asking questions that prompt the student to value their experiences, concerns, hopes, and dreams for the future. It may also mean teachers encouraging students to set directions for themselves and take an interest in relevant pathways, and help students to reflect on their progress accordingly.

The emphasis on co-creation of value may also be extended to the classroom as a whole. Students and teachers can explore together the objectives of learning and how they would collectively reach these objectives. An exploration as such may ideally include a focused discussion on what is worthwhile to learn, and who else might contribute to our learning, and how. This not merely makes clear how valuable teachers' offerings can be to students' undertaking, it also sensitizes the students to the meaningful ways in which they can provide support to each other.

Further, if discussion is sufficiently rich, students and the teacher together may expand their vision to include individuals outside the classroom and the bounds of the school who could assist them in learning and helping them improve. These deliberations might also center on how and what kind of evaluative process would support them in their pursuits.

### ***Evaluation to Inspire Sustained Learning Engagement***

Engagement in learning should not terminate with the end of a unit, a course, or even a degree, but should be lifelong. A relational approach to evaluation thus necessarily encourages the continued participation in learning. Traditional assessment practices do little to accomplish this aim, as they establish the grade for test score as the conclusion of a learning period.

By contrast, in its emphasis on inquiry and dialogue, relational practice may enable students to locate meaningful actions toward the next phase of their learning adventures. Given a course of study, what steps would follow? How would the student like to see these steps taken? Such questions may be posed, for example, in the ongoing reflection on one's learning experiences, or during an overall evaluation at the end of a course of study or a project.

Through inquiry and dialogue, teachers can cultivate an awareness of resources relevant to the student's enthusiasms. Within a topic of interest, teachers might encourage students to look into relevant books, scan the internet, or speak to other teachers, friends, or family members. Such processes of inquiry and dialogue may be extended to help students achieve their long-term objectives. In these ways, learning becomes a meaningful part of a person's life journey, and the evaluative process provides support to the unfolding voyage.

Relational evaluation thus reverses the dulling effects of a factory model of education. By inquiring, valuing, and reflecting on learning processes and experiences, evaluation can inspire students to further care about and to become continuously responsible for their learning, personal development, and well-being.

### ***Evaluation to Promote Relational Flourishing***

Contrary to traditional practices of assessment that undermine trust, friendship, and

authenticity, and cause anxiety, alienation, and antagonism, a relational orientation to evaluation can significantly enrich human relationships and relational well-being. The emphasis is on forms of coordination in the evaluative processes that can breathe life into relationships and learning. While testing, grades and judgment reflect a subject-to-object relationship, a relational approach to evaluation thrives on subject-to-subject relationship.

Relational evaluation is primarily lodged in dialogic and collaborative processes, as opposed to machine-like measurement, there is maximal opportunity for expressing mutual care. The very act of taking an interest in the student's enthusiasm and excitement is already a sign of respect. As a class is invited into co-inquiry, its participants share their hopes and plans with one another, thus strengthening belonging and community. Similarly, as students offer their appreciation of each other's efforts, they too are invited into a posture of mutual care (Mao, 2020). When such discussions emphasize progress, growth and personal development, as opposed to deficit and inadequacy in the students' qualities and capabilities, they may come to feel an abiding sense of support. In all of this, we move toward more generative forms of relating.

Equally, relational evaluation can help build trust, between teacher and students and among students. In caring forms of co-inquiry, students become more confident that the teacher has their best interests at heart and will protect and support them in pursuing what matters to them (as opposed to coercion). When students engage in evaluative dialogue, they will come to feel they can depend and count on each other to be supportive and present in their relationships. With relational strengths at the basis for evaluation, students can be open to critique, feedback and suggestions for improvement.

In summary, the three aims of evaluation can only be realized through relational approaches, in dialogue and collaboration

amongst all involved in the educative activities and processes. Our chief focus in this discussion has been the classroom. However, practices of relational evaluation are also applicable to contexts in which both teachers and schools are evaluated. Testing and grading are equally detrimental in both cases, and the benefits of relational evaluation should be no less available to teachers and to the school community as a whole. That is to say, educative evaluation invites the participation of all in processes of co-inquiry suffused with caring and trust. In doing so, the participants' capacities for collaboration are refined. It thus follows that we may extend the relational approaches outward to include co-inquiry within the wider communal, regional, national, and global contexts.

## RELATIONAL EVALUATION IN PRACTICE

In the wake of discontent with testing and grading, and the phenomenon of teaching-to-the-test, progressive and courageous educators from far and wide have experimented with alternatives. Many of the emergent practices share an emphasis on such relational processes as co-inquiry, dialogic reflection and deliberation, peer-evaluation, and appreciation of valuable aspects of learning. To illustrate and amplify the potentials of a relational orientation to evaluation, we offer four examples. The first two are classroom practices in primary and secondary schools; the third is a case illustrating a relational approach to evaluating teaching; and the last is an integrated approach to school evaluation.

### ***Learning Review: Students as Co-Inquirers***

Learning Review (LR) as an evaluative practice has been introduced in many primary

schools in the UK. These 15-minute review meetings take place periodically over the course of a year, and are always led by the child. They are attended by the class teacher, parent(s)/caregiver(s), and, where possible, the school's principal or head teacher. Children (as young as 9 years of age) prepare a presentation of their learning journeys. The presentation outlines their experiences of learning over time and reflects on their successes, challenges, and needs. It aims to help teachers and parents understand where the student is in their learning and what it may take to support them to progress further.

LR is a relationally sensitive form of evaluation, applying a dialogic and collaborative approach to reflecting on and appreciating learning. It invites students to take an active part in evaluating their learning, prioritizes student voice, and incorporates teachers' and parents' perspectives. In this way, LR stands in stark contrast to the more typical parent/teacher meeting where the teacher simply discusses the child's levels of attainment in various subjects.

Importantly, in preparing for the LR, the student learns to develop a language of appreciation, representation, and reflection. They describe in their own *voice* learning experiences over time, including interests, objectives, what they have learned, and how, and the ways they have overcome challenges and obstacles. This language can integrate stories, workbooks, art, PowerPoint, or other means that are helpful for the teacher and parents to understand and appreciate the child's learning journey. Reflection on learning is multi-vocal, i.e. visual, verbal, and bodily. The more diverse the lenses employed to review learning, the richer the further engagement.

As LR is not judgmental or punitive, students are more open to critically reflect on both their strengths and capacities to embrace challenges in learning. The review holds potential for further stimulating students' curiosity in the learning processes and provides an opportunity for creativity.

### ***Learning Agreement: Sustaining Interest in Learning***

Learning Agreement (LA) is an idea inspired by the work of the Self-Managed Learning College (Cunningham and Bennett, 2000), and now introduced in many secondary schools around the globe. The learning agreements are normally formed at the beginning of a semester/term among a small group of six students, facilitated by a teacher or a mentor. Following initial meetings of the group, each student develops an individual LA that reflects the student's personal interests, along with their learning objectives as well as plans for achieving them. The LA is then presented to the group for peers' and teacher's comments and questions. Although called an 'agreement', it is effectively an informal 'pact' with the group. As it is rooted in the students' relationships, the LA invites members of the group to respect each other's intentions and honor the 'pact' in following identified pathways to learning.

There are many variations of the LA, but often it is developed by students answering five questions focused on significant personal learning objectives and processes (Cunningham and Bennett, 2000). An initial question might be: 'Where have I been in my learning journey?' Here, attention is drawn to past experiences relevant to the student's current interests and motivation. Such a question would be followed with: 'Where am I now?' To reflect on this question, students need to consider their current engagement in learning, and the direction in which they are heading. Next, students are asked to consider: 'Where do I want to go?'. Here they begin exploring their personal learning objectives. Having identified the destination, the students are then asked to imagine the voyage: 'How will I get there?'. Here the challenge is to deliberate on the future learning processes, the relevant resources on which they might draw, and the responsibilities they must accept. The final question is more explicitly evaluative: 'How will I know if I have

arrived?' This invites thoughtful reflection on the criteria for what counts as good learning, and how it is demonstrated (Cunningham and Bennett, 2000). Formulating a LA is not a self-contained event; instead, it serves as a starting point for subsequent reviews of the student's learning processes and progresses. Each LA provides a basis for the student to think about their short-, medium-, and long-term learning objectives, and to evaluate their own hopes and plans accordingly. It also provides a framework within which the group engages in dialogue about learning, and collaborates and supports each other's learning experiences. For instance, in a typical and regular group meeting during the semester, each student will share an account of progress in accordance with their LA. In this way, the LAs enable the group to respond to each other's learning journey with feedback, support, insights, and inspiration.

A special feature of the LA is that it creates a positive relationship among students. They sign the agreement in the presence of each other, thus entrusting responsibilities to themselves but also to their peers. As the group members offer support and advice to each other, appreciation of the relational process is enhanced.

### ***Peer-Evaluation of Teaching***

Teacher evaluation has suffered much the same fate as student evaluation. Standardized formats and the use of student performance as indicators of teacher efficacy do little to enhance teaching, but, instead, they can simultaneously generate stress, a sense of oppression and ill-being. From a relational standpoint, as we have argued, evaluation should provide a positive experience of teachers' learning, and sustain and inspire teacher engagement. It should provide the context and opportunity for teachers' professional growth.

There are many ways in which the evaluation of teaching can support teachers'

professional learning and development, such as peer-to-peer mutual learning, collaboration with students, appreciative inquiry, and action research (see Gergen and Gill, 2020). We take peer-evaluation as an example to illustrate an innovative move in this direction.

Peer-evaluation or peer-feedback is a well-researched practice, and has been implemented by many schools as an approach to the evaluation of teaching (Wilkins and Shin, 2011). In the peer-evaluation process, teachers usually form a small group of 3–4 and they take turns to observe, review, and provide feedback on each other's practices.

In some schools, the small group involves four teachers (as a team) who visit each other's class, observing, reflecting, learning from and contributing to each other's practices (Chism, 2007). For instance, following a classroom visit, there is usually an immediate debriefing dialogue between the two teachers. While the events are still fresh in mind, the observing teacher reflects on the observed lesson process, shares thoughts and comments with regard to how well the students had responded to the practices, what they seemed to have enjoyed and appreciated most about the lesson, and how the teaching might have enhanced students' experiences and their learning engagement. Then the two teachers would discuss and reflect on the classroom process from a professional learning perspective, for example looking at: what seemed to have worked particularly well and how; what was most pleasing for the teacher who was teaching and why; and what might be done differently the next time to further improve the practice.

This kind of debriefing feedback can be extremely informative for both the observer and the observed. Periodically, the team might come together for more extended conversation about particular aspects of teaching. Such dialogue is particularly meaningful in terms of both enhancing teachers' practices, and enriching their peer-relationship. The process also builds trust

as team members collaborate closely to support each other's learning. Relationship and trust can be the basis for the teachers to feel empowered to innovate, and further strengthen their practices.

Thus peer-evaluation can be engaging and inspiring, speaking directly to teachers' need for continuous professional development (CPD) and highlighting that relational approaches to the evaluation of teaching can in part enhance the teachers' well-being and the flourishing of the team's cohesion. No wonder exploration into these practices has expanded around the globe, from Europe and Africa to the Americas and the Asia-Pacific, pointing to a major alternative to assessment, one that links sustained professional learning to relational process (e.g. Pham and Heinemann, 2014; Msila, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2013).

### ***Whole-School Inquiry as Evaluation***

Whole-School Inquiry is increasingly applied as an alternative to the measurement-based accountability agenda of school inspection. Whole-school inquiry can invite all stakeholders in the school to participate in a collective reflection of the school's progress, and envision together how to further advance its aims and support students' learning. Here there is the possibility to combine three activities to bring about a relationally rich process of whole-school inquiry.

First is the Evaluative Questionnaire, which includes thematic questions directly relevant to specific stakeholder groups. Within each theme, participants respond on a five-point scale to a series of statements tapping into their experiences. To illustrate, under the theme of learning, the children may be asked to what extent they like being in the school, feel safe, enjoy taking part in activities, find their work interesting, have friends, and can help others in school. Under the same theme, parents may be asked to what

extent they feel their children are engaged, curious, interested, motivated to learn, developing appropriately, receiving support, and encouraged to contribute to others' learning. Similarly, teachers will reflect on the extent to which their students are motivated to learn, curious, asking good questions, making progress according to their needs and capabilities, working collaboratively, willing to take risks in project work, and are mindful of others' interests and needs. The questionnaire responses can provide a wealth of information for subsequent discussion.

An in-depth interview is the second approach, which can be used to supplement the questionnaires, thus adding details that put a human face to the numbers. The interviews might focus on experiences and perspectives related to different aspects of the shared school life. Reflection is sought from representatives of students, administrators, teachers, teaching assistants, parents. The interview tends to be semi-structured around the main themes of evaluation, i.e. teaching, learning, community engagement and governance. The interviews can offer nuanced understanding of the school's practices, as they are experienced by a wide range of stakeholders.

A third component of the whole-school evaluation consists of focus-group dialogue. During the dialogue, the participants are invited to reflect on the results of the two preceding inquiries. It seeks participants' analysis and insights into what the school has learned from the evaluative process, what the school community might need to change or improve, and how. Focus-group dialogue can be informed by appreciative inquiry practices, facilitated at different levels: at the classroom level where students join administrators and teachers in the reflection; at the school level where administrators and teachers focus on their own special concerns; and finally at the community level, where administrators, teachers, parents, and stakeholders within the community come together to discuss the school's progress. For a typical focus-group,

the size should be limited to roughly 12–15 so as to encourage conversational depth.

With this combination of practices, including questionnaires, interviews and focus-group dialogue, the whole-school evaluation process can inspire the community's curiosity about its processes, potentials, and also needs for change. A sense of collective responsibility is thus invited.

In summary, these are but four examples of relationally rich practices of evaluation in action. They provide meaningful antidotes to the toxicity of measurement, assessment, and performance ratings. They also serve as invitations for further innovation.

## TRANSFORMATION IN EDUCATION AND BEYOND

We are scarcely alone in our concern with developing meaningful and implementable alternatives to the measurement-based assessment tradition. Congenial with many aspects of our relational approach are practices of empowerment evaluation (Fetterman and Wandersman, 2004), participatory evaluation (Whitmore, 1998), dialogic evaluation (Greene, 2001), responsive evaluation (Greene and Abma, 2002), and democratic evaluation (Ryan and DeStefano, 2000), among others. At the same time, while the way is being paved to replace testing and grading with humane processes of evaluation, far more is ultimately at stake. There is first the potential for transforming the culture of education, and second, the significance of this transformation for the future well-being of humanity.

In the case of educational transformation, relational practices of evaluation represent an important step forward. However, evaluation constitutes only one of what are often considered the three core pillars of education, with *pedagogy* and *curriculum* as the remaining two (Bernstein, 1971). What is to be said about transformation in the latter? Here one

must realize that discontent with the factory model of education has inspired widespread innovation in both cases, and that much of this innovation is congenial with the relational vision we have highlighted here. Notable, for example, are pedagogies of dialogue (e.g. Skidmore and Murakami, 2017; Matusov, 2009) and collaboration (e.g. Littleton and Mercer, 2013; Mercer et al. 2019). In the case of curriculum, the major shift is away from standardization. Developments in emergent curricula are among the most prominent, along with the expansion of individually tailored curricula in forward-looking schools (Gill and Thomson, 2016). Such developments favor more dialogic relations between student and teachers, and between students and others who can support their learning journey.

In effect, there are now available relationally enriched practices in both the domains of pedagogy and curriculum, but the development of such practices has been obstructed by the prevailing data-driven demand. Dialogic pedagogy and emergent curricula are at odds with the forms of standardization that testing and grading require. Thus, in replacing assessment practices with relational evaluation, we open the doors to the full flourishing of these innovations in pedagogy and curriculum. It is here that a new chapter in the history of education would begin.

Such a transformation is also significant in terms of cultural life more generally in schools and beyond. In the present case the potentials are profound. One of the chief reasons for establishing schools as production sites was that educated young people were needed to fill available jobs. Assumed was reasonable stability in job requirements, thus favoring a standardized curriculum, and testing as a form of quality assurance. However, we now live in a world of rapid and unpredictable change. In these conditions, standardization in education reduces the potentials of a society which is increasingly marked by diversity and multiplicity. In contrast, a flourishing world is where young people can

bring multiple talents, interests, and enthusiasms into the future-making conversations. Needed are capacities for appreciating and integrating different perspectives, collaborating, and innovating (Visse and Abma, 2018). It is to these needs that a relationally transformed education speaks most directly.

There is more. In the emerging global conditions, the various cultures of the world are now thrust together as never before. Increasingly we confront conflicts among those with differing values, goals, religious beliefs, and honored traditions. Global survival and human flourishing will soon depend on skills in negotiating this terrain of difference, and capacities in co-creating a new world of harmony. A relational transformation in education should favor the development of precisely these kinds of qualities and capacities. We move here to the ethical dimension of relational evaluation, one in which the well-being of the relational process must be cherished above all.

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