

A Qualitative Evaluation Process for Educational Programs Serving Handicapped Students in Rural Areas¹

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This paper describes a qualitative methodology designed to evaluate special education programs in rural areas serving students with severe special needs. A rationale is provided for the use of the elements of aesthetic criticism as the basis of methodology, and specific descriptions of the steps for its implementation and validation are provided. Some practical limitations and particular areas of usefulness are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

One result of Public Law (PL) 94-142 (The Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975) is that a growing number of severely handicapped students are being educated in integrated public school settings [2; 7; 14; 15; 17]. Prior to the passage of this landmark legislation, most severely handicapped children received services in state institutions and private schools and agencies. As these students have become part of the public school, school administrators have been faced with a number of new problems and issues [15]. One such issue is the adequate evaluation of the complex and costly programs which have been developed to serve these students.

The problem investigated in this study is the adaptation, implementation, and validation of a qualitative educational evaluation methodology which can be used to evaluate programs for severely handicapped students. While the methodology may be applicable across geographical areas, this study focuses on the development of a process specific to the characteristics of rural and sparsely populated areas.

BACKGROUND

Over the past decade a growing number of investigators have begun to look beyond the traditionally quantitative paradigms that have dominated the field of educational research and evaluation throughout this century. The majority of these researchers have addressed this topic in relation to the evaluation of regular education programs [5; 6; 8; 10; 12]. However, a few investigators have focused upon the use of qualitative program evaluations for programs serving handicapped students [1; 16]. As a group, researchers involved in the use of qualitative

paradigms to evaluate educational programs encourage the use of established methodologies commonly employed in the social sciences or the humanities.

It is the contention of qualitative researchers that traditional methodologies have major limitations in situations where the phenomena to be evaluated do not lend themselves to quantitative interpretation [6]. It is this limitation that makes traditional program evaluation techniques especially inadequate for the evaluation of programs for severely handicapped students.

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Some attempts have been made to develop a qualitative methodology for evaluating educational programs based upon the elements of aesthetic criticism. The most comprehensive of these efforts have been carried out by Eisner [4; 5] and a group of his graduate students at Stanford University [11; 18].

According to Dickens [3] these education criticism developers, however, "have not grounded their assumptions and methodologies in a systematic aesthetic theory" (p. 174). Furthermore, although a basis has been made for using criticism as an evaluation technique, what actually has been developed as a methodology diverges from an aesthetic theoretical base. The result is a qualitative evaluation methodology that is not well-grounded in theory, and therefore has no basis upon which to be judged. Such methodologies leave themselves open to the critics of qualitative measures, and fuel the claims that qualitative techniques are less rigorous and reliable than quantitative empirical methodologies. If qualitative program evaluation methodologies are to be accepted, they must be well-grounded in theory and systematically validated.

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STATEMENT OF THE PURPOSE AND SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

Purpose

The purposes of this study were to:

1. Adapt the critical methodology of phenomenological-existential aesthetic theory as a means of evaluating educational programs.
2. Validate the adapted critical methodology as a qualitative evaluation process for educational programs serving severely handicapped students.

Specific Objectives

Based upon the two general purposes, the following questions are explored:

1. Can a coherent methodology be developed from the proposed theoretical base that facilitates evaluation of the characteristics of a dynamic educational program through the process of educational criticism?
2. Is this methodology of educational criticism an appropriate means of evaluating the qualitative elements of a classroom for severely handicapped students?
3. Does this methodology show potential as a means of facilitating the use of educational criticism in classrooms for nonhandicapped students?
4. What are the practical limitations of this critical methodology as a program evaluation technique?

The Research Plan

In order to pursue answers to the questions stated in the Specific Objectives, the study was divided into four major phases:

The development phase. The development phase consisted of research into phenomenological existential aesthetic theory and how it has been incorporated into educational practices to date. Based upon these findings and the works of Eisner [4; 5] on educational criticism and Dickens [3] on critical methodology, a methodology was developed that incorporates the elements of each of these areas into guidelines for the purpose of evaluating educational programs.

The implementation phase. The implementation phase involved spending a 1-week period in a public school classroom serving severely handicapped students. During this time the methodology developed in phase one was used to guide the experience. No direct treatment of the students was employed. The involvement was primarily observational in nature although discussions and interactions with the teaching staff took place. During this experience, ongoing field notes were taken based upon the guidelines established in the development phase. Since the primary purpose of the study was to adapt and validate the methodology, a single classroom evaluation was considered adequate to demonstrate the process.

The criticism phase. It was during this phase that the elements of critical judgment were written that the process of judgment was developed to share with others. This

process reflects not only the descriptive and interpretive nature of aesthetic criticism, but discloses judgments regarding the evaluated program.

The validation phase. The validation phase provides a process through which the quality of the earlier phases was considered. The validation method utilized was consensual validation and involved two distinct processes. These processes are referred to as structural corroboration and referential adequacy [5].

Structural corroboration is a process through which pieces of information are put together in such a way that they support one another and create a whole. It is the process through which a prosecutor puts together pieces of evidence that will support a conviction of a defendant. All the pieces must validate one another in order to be judged structurally corroborated. Structural corroboration was judged on two levels: (a) the consistency of the criticism to the concept of the critical methodology, and (b) the internal consistency of the written criticism. The judgments regarding structural corroboration were made by critical methodology upon which this study was based.

Referential adequacy of educational criticism depends upon whether or not another person can find the cues provided by the criticism in the actual object or event. That is, elements disclosed in the criticism must actually exist as traits of the object. An effective criticism serves as a guide to assist others in judging complex phenomena.

To provide the test of referential adequacy, three special educators familiar with educational programs for severely handicapped students were asked to review the criticism and then to visit the classroom. Their role was to judge whether or not the elements of the criticism were in the classroom and whether or not the criticism was successful in expanding their perception and understanding of the program.

ADAPTATION OF THE METHODOLOGY

This section fully describes the adaptation of the existential-phenomenological critical methodology as an evaluation process for educational programs serving severely handicapped students. A set of postulates and specific steps are presented to serve as a guide to understanding and implementing the methodology. Each of the steps is identified and discussed in this section.

Postulates

Drawing from the work of Kaelin [9] and Dickens [3] the following postulates have been developed to assist the evaluator in determining the significance of the educational program under consideration:

Postulate 1. All significance of the Educational Program is context bound.

Postulate 2. The context of the Educational Program is composed of surface and depth counters and their relations. Counters include both the directly perceived organization of the surfaces of an object and the representations, ideas and images brought out through direct interaction with the object in a particular context.

Postulate 3. No individual program counter has absolute significance, but only the significance which is apparent by a relationship with some other counter within the context of the Educational Program.

Postulate 4. The significance of the total Educational Program context is the felt expressiveness of all the counters as they come to closure in a single experience.

Steps to Implementing the Methodology

This section provides a description of the eight steps involved in the use of the existential-phenomenological critical methodology as an evaluation process for programs serving severely handicapped students. In addition, it provides some considerations of the related skills and knowledge a person using the methodology might be expected to incorporate into the evaluation process.

Each of the following steps to implementing the methodology has been developed to be consistent with an existential-phenomenological theoretical base. In addition, each step takes into consideration both the practical considerations of program evaluation, and the particular characteristics of educational programs serving severely handicapped students.

Step 1: Determining the purpose of the evaluation. In order to provide an effective evaluation, the evaluator must be fully aware of its purpose. Scriven [13] offers two basic categories of evaluation procedures, formative and summative. Formative evaluation has as its primary purpose the improvement of an existing program. The purpose of summative evaluation is to make decisions as to how worthwhile a particular program is in relation with other competing programs. Since the concept behind the development of the evaluation process undertaken in this study is to work towards the improvement of existing programs for severely handicapped students, it is expected that it would most appropriately be used as a formative evaluation process.

Step 2: Defining the evaluand. Once the purpose of the evaluation has been established, it is necessary to delineate just what is to be considered as part of the program to be evaluated. In evaluation research terms, this is called defining the evaluand. For the purposes of this particular methodology, the following questions have been developed to assist in defining the evaluand in educational programs serving severely handicapped students.

– Will the evaluation focus upon a particular aspect of a program (i.e., language programs) or will it include all of the educational programming within the classroom?

– Will home carry-over programs or home-school coordination be considered as part of the program?

– Will special services such as therapies and adaptive physical education be considered as part of the program?

– Will nonacademic periods such as lunch and recess be considered as part of the program?

– Will the school bus ride or other transportation to and from the program be considered as part of the program?

– Will regularly scheduled out-of-classroom activities such as field trips, aquatics classes, or other recreational

programs be considered as part of the program?

– Will planned integration activities such as peer-tutor programs or placement in regular classrooms be considered as part of the program?

– Are there any additional aspects of this particular program that the agency requesting the evaluation wishes to be included as a part of this evaluation?

Step 3: Determining the evaluation period. The amount of time required to complete the on-site evaluation will depend upon the aspects of the program determined to be part of the evaluand, and the evaluator's familiarity with the program. In most situations where the routine schedule spans a week period, and the evaluator has been provided with an overview of the program, a one-week period on-site should be adequate to fully experience the total program. This period might need to be expanded if there is an unforeseen interruption in the schedule (e.g., staff illness, school holidays, etc.) or if the evaluator needs additional time for orientation. If, however, the evaluator is a person who has extensive experience with the program, or if the program is the same each day, the evaluation period may be cut to three or four days. It should be acknowledged, however, that abbreviating the duration of the on-site period may not give the staff and students adequate time to adjust to the observer and to go about the daily routine. It is for this reason that an on-site period of less than one week should be selected only after careful consideration.

Step 4: Performing the epoché or phenomenological reduction. Performing the epoché is an essential step in this methodology. It is through this process of consciously remaining open to the phenomena that the evaluator is able to put aside a priori assumptions and philosophical abstractions which are outside the experience as it is perceived. Through the use of the epoché the evaluator puts aside matters of personal taste or preference for the purposes of the evaluation. This "bracketing" acts to remove filters which may interfere with the evaluator's ability to "see" what is occurring. However, as Kaelin [9] points out, performing the epoché is not a mystical procedure, but rather a conscious effort on the part of the evaluator to remain open to the experience.

Step 5: Experiencing the phenomena. This step is closely related to Step 4 in that it involves the evaluator's conscious presence in the situation which is being evaluated. The existential-phenomenological critical methodology demands that in addition to consciously remaining open to the experience, the evaluator also hold in abeyance any judgments regarding the program until after the data are collected and interpreted.

Step 6: Collecting the data. The use of on-going field notes is recommended as the primary means of data collection when employing this methodology as a program evaluation process. To facilitate the process, evaluators are encouraged to review and clarify the written notes at the end of each observation period.

During the data collection process, evaluators should place themselves in the roles of a number of different individuals in an effort to fully experience the program from a variety of perspectives. In the case of an educa-

tional program, this should include both students' and teachers' perspectives.

Another aspect of the data collection process is the inclusion of both a description of the evaluator's perceptions and an interpretation of those perceptions at the time of the data collection. To facilitate delineating between description and interpretation in the field notes, interpretations should be placed in parenthesis. These two types of descriptions, when viewed in aesthetic terms, are surface level and depth level counters.

Surface counters—The surface counters of an educational program for severely handicapped students might include: (a) the use of time and space, (b) educational materials, (c) teacher/child ratios, (d) physical design of the environment, (e) teaching strategies, (f) special needs of individual students, (g) student groupings, (h) curriculum content, and (i) learning activities. The surface level would also include interactions among the surface counters.

Depth counters—The depth counters of an educational program for severely handicapped students include the interpretation of the clarity and intensity of the relationships among the surface counters and the images which might be brought forth by those interpretations as perceived by the evaluator. Depth level images and representations are essential aspects of the complex teaching and learning process.

Step 7: Judgment. The existential-phenomenological critical methodology results in the ability to make judgments regarding the quality of the programs being evaluated. The concept upon which such judgments are made is closure. Closure is the determination of aesthetic judgment when the surface and depth counters and their relations are considered by the evaluator to fund the total experience of the educational program. That is, the clarity and intensity of the functional relationships in and between surface and depth counters provide a basis for judgments to be made pertaining to the quality of the educational program as perceived by the evaluator.

Step 8: Writing the criticism. Once the evaluator has reviewed and organized the data and made the judgments regarding the elements of closure, the results must be put in written form. It is suggested that aesthetic criticism provides an appropriate form for the report. The written criticism should allow those who read it to experience the program with a greater awareness and understanding of the phenomena. It should include descriptions and interpretations of the program as perceived by the evaluator. The written criticism should provide the basis for others to understand the judgments made by the evaluator regarding the program.

The steps described above are meant to serve as a guide to the existential-phenomenological critical methodology adapted as a program evaluation process for considering educational programs for severely handicapped students. The methodology itself does not address the basic consultative and supervisory strategies that would also play an important role in developing relationships and communication between the evaluator and those involved in the evaluation. It is expected that the experi-

enced supervisor or evaluator would be familiar with these aspects of evaluation and would incorporate them into the evaluation process. In addition, it is expected that the evaluator would draw upon these consultative and supervisory skills to facilitate the sharing of the written evaluation results with the appropriate staff. The focus of this study does not allow for an in-depth discussion of these skills. However, numerous volumes have been written on the topic of evaluation and supervision strategies in education.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The results and conclusions of this study are summarized based upon the four research questions developed to guide this effort.

Question 1

Can coherent methodology be developed from the proposed theoretical base that facilitates evaluation of the characteristics of a dynamic educational program through the process of educational criticism? Based upon results of the validation procedures of the study, this question can be answered, at least in part, affirmatively. This question was addressed in two ways in the validation phase of the study. First the theoretical base and methodology were submitted for evaluation to Dickens [3], whose earlier work in this area provided a basis for this study. Dickens found the methodology consistent with the existential-phenomenological base from which it was developed.

The second area of validation which addressed this question was provided by three special educators who are experts in the area of programs for students with severe handicapping conditions. These three persons were given a copy of the written criticism and asked to spend a two-hour period in the evaluated classroom, and then to fill out a questionnaire based upon that experience. All of the evaluators stated that the methodology was useful in evaluating programs for severely handicapped students. The qualifier to the affirmative answer to this question comes from one validator who felt as though while the written criticism provided a good basis for looking at the "whole picture," that it lacked the specificity which she believed was necessary to work with teachers toward making improvements.

The final aspect of the study which contributes to an affirmative response to this question are the methodological steps themselves. The steps attempt to put into practical terms an otherwise abstract methodology. While further refinements will continue to be made in the methodology as it is used in the future, it can be concluded that a coherent program evaluation methodology may be developed from the proposed theoretical base, and that this study has contributed significantly to that end.

Question 2

Is this methodology of educational criticism an appropriate means of evaluating the qualitative elements of

a classroom for severely handicapped students? This question was addressed by the three validators who provided the referential adequacy portion of the validation. Each of the validators stated that the written criticism provided an accurate description and interpretation of the classroom. Each validator commented on the ability of the methodology to capture the qualitative aspects of the classroom, although each stated it in his or her own manner.

Question 3

Does this methodology show potential as a means of facilitating the use of educational criticism for nonhandicapped students? A great deal of qualification is necessary in considering what this study shows in response to this question. While the study did provide the first attempts to develop specific methodological steps to implement a program evaluation process utilizing the elements of aesthetic criticism, it dealt specifically with programs for severely handicapped students. Therefore, the methodological steps may have overlooked some significant areas of consideration for regular education classrooms (especially in the areas of surface and depth counters). However, since the methodology was utilized in a special education classroom in a regular public elementary school in a rural area, some aspects of the methodological steps are likely to be appropriate, while others may need to be omitted, created, or modified.

Given the qualification discussed above, it is concluded that this question can be answered, at least in part, positively. That is, the methodology does show potential as a means of facilitating the use of educational criticism in classrooms for nonhandicapped students if the evaluator can adapt the methodological steps to the specific arena of regular education classrooms.

Question 4

What are the practical limitations of this critical methodology as a program evaluation technique? The answer to this question was drawn from both the personal experience of utilizing the methodology, and the responses of the program supervisor who participated in the study.

First of all, the critical methodology requires a great deal of time and expertise on the part of the evaluator. The evaluator must spend enough time in the program to become fully familiar with it and to allow the participants to become comfortable with the observer's presence. Although the recommended one-week period may be decreased if the program supervisor carries out the evaluation, this methodology will probably require more time than existing evaluation procedures.

In addition to the time requirements, as stated earlier, this methodology requires a great deal of expertise on the part of the evaluator. The evaluator must have a thorough understanding of the type of program which is being evaluated as well as familiarity with existing trends in the field. This requirement is essential since the evaluator has

no checklist or guide upon which to base the judgments. The other areas of expertise which are required of the evaluator include: (a) an understanding of the methodology, (b) the ability to take field notes, (c) the ability of work without a guide, (d) the ability to write the criticism, and (e) the interpersonal skills necessary to share the results in a growth-oriented manner.

Another practical limitation of the methodology is that since the evaluator is the instrument, the evaluator must be validated as capable of implementing the methodology successfully. This may be accomplished through the use of the referential adequacy evaluation process as described in this study. However, since many supervisors may not feel comfortable in carrying out such a process, they might choose to have an outside consultant evaluate the programs. Since the methodology requires a great deal of time, this option may prove too expensive for use on a regular basis.

The final practical limitation of this methodology is that due to requirements of many negotiated contracts, evaluations of staff must be objective; therefore, this methodology will not replace many existing evaluation procedures, but rather augment them. While some may see this as positive, others may consider yet another layer of evaluation as excessively expensive.

SUMMARY

In summary, this paper describes a qualitative methodology, explores its implementation, and identifies some of its practical limitations. What is evident is that the methodology must be viewed as providing another option in program evaluation, and not the most appropriate answer to the evaluation needs of all special education programs. It appears likely to be most useful as a complementary component to existing evaluation systems in programs serving students with severe and multiple special needs in rural school districts.

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