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AUTHOR Guskey, Thomas R.
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ABSTRACT

Guidelines for and obstacles to focusing on student learning outcomes as the primary educational goal are presented in this paper. Five obstacles that impede the focus on student outcomes are the beliefs that: learning should be normally distributed; education's purpose is to select talent; the purpose of testing is for evaluation only; curriculum and instruction are ends in themselves; and specifying outcomes diminishes the creative process. Guidelines for improving student learning include: (1) think big, start small; (2) utilize teamwork; and (3) focus on success. (9 references) (LMI)

THE IMPORTANCE OF FOCUSING ON STUDENT OUTCOMES*

Thomas R. Guskey
College of Education
University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY 40506
Phone: 606/257-8666

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THE IMPORTANCE OF FOCUSING ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

The North Central Association has recently embarked on a bold initiative that may well be the most powerful and most significant reform effort taking place in our country today. Through the efforts of this organization, educators at all levels are coming to see that if educational programs are to be planned and if continued improvements a e to be made, it is necessary to have a clear conception of the goals being sought. And regardless of the way schools and colleges are formed or reformed, structured or restructured, it is imperative these goals center on *student outcomes*.

When student learning outcomes become the focus, they form the criteria by which *all* else is done. They are the basis by which instructional materials are selected, content is outlined, instructional processes are developed, and evaluation procedures are prepared and carried out. All aspects of an educational program are really *means* to accomplish these basic purposes.

Of course, we need to recognize the idea of focusing on student outcomes is not necessarily new. All the basic tenets of what we now call "outcome-based education" were elegantly set forth by Ralph W. Tyler over forty years ago. In his book, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, published in 1949, Tyler emphasized that teaching and learning must be seen as unequivocally linked. Although learning can take place without directed teaching, it impossible for teaching to take place in the

absence of learning. It was Tyler who suggested that to say, "I taught them, they just didn't learn it!" is as foolish as saying, "I sold it to them, they just didn't buy it!" He stressed that teaching is not the sort of thing one can go off into the wilderness, alone, and do -- not even if one takes along a mission statement, a curriculum guide, lesson plans, and a textbook! To Tyler it was clear the most valid, reliable, and defensible criterion of teaching effectiveness, at any level, is student learning.

Today, through the efforts of the North Central Association, educators from preschools to those who teach in graduate and professional schools are coming to see the importance of such a focus. But if these efforts are to meet with success, there are several major obstacles that will need to be overcome. I would like to describe what I believe to be the most pressing of these obstacles. I also would like to offer several guidelines for overcoming them. If these obstacles cannot be overcome, even the most valiant improvement efforts are likely to result only in increased frustration and resignation. If, on the other hand, they can be overcome, current reform and restructuring efforts just may bring about the kind of significant and enduring improvement that is so desperately needed in education today.

Obstacles

The major obstacles confronting our current improvement efforts are all steeped in tradition. All are rooted in the basic beliefs held by many about the nature of learning and the potential of education. Because they are so deeply rooted, all are difficult to change, especially without

direct personal experiences to the contrary. The most pressing of these obstacles include the following:

Obstacle #1: *The belief that learning outcomes should be normally distributed.* If we are to succeed in our improvement efforts, we must help educators at all levels understand that a normal curve distribution represents random possibilities among naturally occurring events *when nothing intervenes to alter them.* In agriculture, for example, crop yields might be normally distributed. But when we add fertilizer, an intervention, we expect that distribution to be altered. Specifically, we expect to attain more and better crops. To the degree the crop yield remains normally distributed, we judge the intervention to have failed.

Similarly, in education, teaching is an intervention. It is an intentional and purposeful endeavor, designed and carried out with a clear goal; that is, to foster student learning. If learning outcomes remain normally distributed after teaching, that too is an indication that we, as educators, have failed. The intervention, our teaching, had no effect, no influence, and no impact.

Obstacle #2: *The belief that our purpose in education is to select talent.* At many levels of education we do a wonderful job of accentuating the differences among learners. We sort them, rank them, and put them into categories so that we can better differentiate among them. It begins as early as first grade when we assign students to reading groups based on "ability."

But our purpose in education is not to differentiate among learners so that we might select talent. If that were so, we should teach as poorly as possible, for that will accomplish it well. On the contrary, our purpose is *to develop* talent. We should work hard to ensure the pool of talent among our students is as wide and as inclusive as possible.

Obstacle #3: *The belief that tests are assessment devices used only to grade and evaluate students.* Although test results can be used to assign grades to students' work, they also can serve as powerful learning tools. They can provide both teachers and students with valuable information on learning progress. This information can then be used to guide the correction of errors so that minor learning difficulties are remedied before they become major learning problems. Sadly, this "formative" role of tests is neglected by most educators today.

Obstacle #4: *The belief that curriculum and instruction are ends in themselves.* Many educators suffer under the mistaken notion that if we do a good job of articulating our curriculum and have the right checklist of teacher behaviors to use for clinical supervision, improvement efforts will be successful. We invest great amounts of time, money, and energy developing beautiful, multi-color curriculum guides and descriptions of teacher competencies that generally end up stored on shelves or in desk drawers. While it is true that curriculum and instruction are important, they must be seen as *means* to far more important ends -- the improvement of student learning. Therefore, our attention must be on how these translate to classroom practice and what improvements, if any, they bring to learning outcomes.

Obstacle #5: *The belief that specifying outcomes reduces teaching to those things most easily tested.* Because teaching is a purposeful and intentional activity, we must be able to specify our goals. But doing so should not keep us from pursuing those learning outcomes we judge to be most valuable, regardless of how difficult they are to assess.

Suppose, for example, we wish to teach students to write more creatively. To do so, it is essential that we first describe, in some detail, the difference between a composition that is creative and one that is not. If that difference cannot be described, what will be the content of our teaching? Describing this difference is, in essence, a necessary prerequisite to teaching creative writing. Describing this difference also does not diminish the creative process. It does, however, help us establish criteria by which we can assess students' writing, give students guidance in revising their written works, and then evaluate their learning progress. Granted, establishing such criteria will not be easy. It is also evident that whatever criteria we select, they will not be adequately or validly assessed with multiple-choice testing instruments. Nevertheless, we must be able to make these criteria clear if we wish to help students improve.

Guidelines for Improvement

So, how do we overcome these obstacles? What strategies can be employed to counter these beliefs, steeped in tradition, so that valuable and meaningful improvements can be made? I offer here three guidelines for

these efforts. All are derived from research on the change process. It is important to keep in mind, however, that adhering to these guidelines will not necessarily guarantee success. Still, substantial evidence suggests that neglecting these factors will result in programs that fail to bring about significant or enduring change in any form.

Guideline #1: *Think big; start small.* If there is one truism in the vast research literature on change it is that the magnitude of change persons are asked to make is inversely related to their likelihood of making it. Professionals at all levels generally oppose radical alterations to their present procedures. For this reason, change must be approached in a gradual and incremental fashion. Otherwise, improvement efforts will quickly succumb to powerful environmental and organizational forces that are highly resistant to change (Timar, 1989).

Any meaningful change in education must take place within the context of what Sarason (1982) terms the programmatic and behavioral regularities of schools -- the commonplace events, processes, and practices that exist in all school settings. These regularities are powerful impediments to large scale change and serve to reinforce the impression that, in schools, "the more things change, the more they stay the same."

But while planned change efforts must not be so ambitious that they require too much too soon from the implementation system, they need to be sufficient in scope to challenge professionals and kindle interest (McLaughlin, 1990). Modest, narrowly conceived programs seldom bring about significant improvement. Change efforts, therefore, should not be designed

from the limited perspective of what is acceptable or "reasonable." Rather, they should be designed with a vision of what is possible (Mann, 1986).

Guideline #2: *Work in teams.* The discomfort that accompanies change is greatly compounded if the individuals involved perceive they have no say in the process, or if they feel isolated and detached in their improvement efforts. For this reason it is imperative that all aspects of the improvement process be designed and carried out by teams of administrators and teachers working together.

Effective practice in classrooms or in schools cannot be mandated. Besides, mandated programs seldom bring about desired change. Instead, we need to consider how policies can enable and facilitate more effective practice. One way to do this is to make sure those individuals who will be expected to carry out policy decisions are involved in making those decisions (Goodlad, 1984).

Building level administrators and especially classroom teachers must be recognized as the core of any improvement effort. It is teachers, not administrators, who iniate innovations and are in most direct contact with students. They represent a vast reservoir of professional competence, commitment, and motivation that will enable us to move ahead steadily on the road to better education for the young people we serve.

It also is clear, however, that student learning will not improve radically by simply releasing the reins on teachers so that they can be

individual agents of change. Once the need for change is recognized, individuals need ideas in order to act, and the demands of teaching make it difficult for those ideas to come from within the classroom (Guskey, 1986). Administrators, on the other hand, through their actions can create organizational climates that encourage teachers to be inventive, to experiment with new ideas, to attempt new approaches, and to share newly gained knowledge.

Working in teams allows the visions for improvement derived from different perspectives within the organization to be shared. It promotes collegial interaction and acknowledges the naturally occurring relationships among professionals. It also helps focus the attention on shared purposes and improvement goals.

Guideline #3: *Focus on Success*. It is generally recognized that success is one of the most powerful motivational devices we have to offer students. In learning environments, students persist in activities at which they can experience some degree of success, and avoid with passion those at which they cannot, or believe they cannot, be successful. The ever-increasing popularity of video games makes this clear.

We need to recognize that success is also a very powerful motivational incentive for teachers. And for most teachers, success is defined in terms of the learning of their students. The vast majority of teachers entered education and stay in the profession because of their desire to help students learn. It is also for this reason they are willing to try new approaches. As McLaughlin and Marsh (1978) noted, "A primary

motivation for teachers to take on extra work and other personal costs of attempting change is the belief that they will become better teachers and *their students will benefit*" (p. 75). Of secondary importance to them are such stimuli as state regulations, administrative directives, funding increases or cuts, or parent compliments or complaints (Larsen, 1991).

Success and progress are the very stuff that make teaching worthwhile. New practices will likely be abandoned, however, in the absence of any evidence of their positive effects. Therefore, plans for implementing a new program or innovation should include specific procedures by which teachers and administrators can receive evidence of the effects of their efforts. And this evidence must be *meaningful*. It must be based on *valued learning outcomes*. A summary sheet of results from a standardized achievement test, which may not be well aligned with what students were taught, seldom provides this kind of evidence. To focus attention on meaningful student learning outcomes is the essence of outcome-based education.

The bold initiative set forth by the North C .tral Association, to focus the attention of all on student learning outcomes, presents a tremendous challenge. But it is a challenge stemming from a very optimistic perspective on the potential of education and the power of educators to bring about significant change. Meeting this challenge will be difficult. However, there is no more valuable work to be done in education today.

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