

On Student Evaluation

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Randall Curren takes up issues of fairness in student evaluation through the timely example of Outcomes Assessment (OA) in "Equal Opportunity and Outcomes Assessment." While much has been written about OA through discussions of high-stakes tests and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Curren looks at this issue in terms of routine student evaluation, the grades given to students on a regular basis that become their grade point average, which is used to help determine to which colleges they are admitted, and into which jobs they will be hired. Curren argues that fair equality of opportunity seems to preclude the use of grades as credentials in primary and secondary schools. Grades used as credentials are judgments of worth and responsibility, imposed and sanctioned by institutions of government, that have a significant impact on students' lives. Curren suggests that grades should reflect the quality of schoolwork students do, yet not ignore the role of constitutive luck that accounts for variations in academic performances. Consequently, he recommends that grades should only be used in primary and secondary schools to promote learning and make decisions conducive to equal educational attainment, and not used as credentials.

First, as the mother of four, and a former Montessori teacher, I could not agree more with Curren. I underscore his recommendation. In Montessori schools, children do not usually receive grades for their work. They are credited when taught a new concept or skill, work with the materials and practice using this new concept/skill, and master the concept/skill by demonstrating they can consistently use it correctly. They receive continual feedback from the learning materials as well as their teachers (adults and peers), and when they achieve mastery they become teachers for others still learning. I believe this non-grading method of assessment is an example of Curren's OA.

Second, I also partner with a high-school English teacher in an inner-city school that has failed the NCLB standards and is being reconstituted, and I will explore Curren's argument to see if it applies to such teachers. Third, I worry about the lack of discussion of power issues in Curren's essay, in terms of schools being allowed to remain neutral and other social institutions not being held accountable for their constitutive responsibilities for children's education. This concerns me about NCLB and OA; teachers will never be able to meet the demands of educating all students adequately without serious attention to schools' positions within larger injustices at the nexus of multiple institutions responsible for educating children.

Let's begin by sketching Curren's argument to see if it can be applied to teachers. He argues that teachers bear significant responsibility for the student's understanding, knowledge, and ability, calling this constitutive responsibility. But, what about parents? As a parent, I have felt the weight of constitutive responsibility, for example, to make sure my children were treated lovingly, taught social norms for

associating with others, and attended school prepared to learn. I had to take good care of myself, with prenatal care, to make sure they had a good start, and then provided them preventive care through regular visits to doctors and dentists. I ensured they were rested, well fed, and clean when they arrived to school on time, with their homework done, ready to learn. I gave them words and explanations for their observations and experiences, and expanded their direct and indirect experiences (trips to the library or zoo; reading books, watching films, and listening to music together).

As my own children's elementary teacher, I bore even greater constitutive responsibility. I taught them basic mathematical concepts, literacy skills, history, geography, science, and some music, art, and physical education. I was responsible for making sure they did their homework, but I also assigned and assessed it.

While I attended to my own children's learning preparedness, I could not attest to the preparedness of the other children I taught. I had no control over the family settings of children such as Jerry (his parents were on the FBI's "Most Wanted" list), or John (his uncle flushed his head in the toilet whenever he was "bad" as a toddler). I had parents who allowed their children to eat a diet only of fruit, withdrew their love when they were angry, refused to let their child dress herself at the age of ten, divorced due to alcohol or drug addictions, or cheated on each other with other classroom parents.

Curren uses Thomas Nagel's moral luck concept to discuss how traits of temperament, inclination, and intellect are determined by factors largely beyond a person's control, and yet matter to one's academic performance and grades. Grades by themselves do not carry moral judgments, but when we attach rewards and penalties to them and require by law that they must be administered, then we bring moral significance to grades. Curren wonders how it is fair to judge and grade children when their upbringing and other formative factors are beyond their control, matters of moral luck. I wonder as well, how it is fair to judge teachers based on their students' grades and test scores, when so much of the care of these students is out of their hands and is the responsibility of other social institutions (families, communities, churches, economics, popular culture, and the government). Curren thinks OA can create incentives to teach well — but I wonder how, when so much of what students bring to the classroom is beyond any teacher's control.

Curren deploys John Rawls to help clarify society's responsibility to establish equal opportunities of education for all regardless of their constitutive luck in terms of family income, for example, again recognizing that schools have formative influences on their students' constitutions. He also cites Brian Barry in exploring the ramifications of the constitutive responsibility associated with fair equality of opportunity (material equality, and systems of social intervention). Curren clearly recognizes the cumulative developmental disadvantages of poverty and that these cannot be overcome without some way of making family resources (including food, shelter, health care, childcare) fair. He is especially concerned about luck and other uncontrollable factors that shape students' choices. How can grades reflect the quality of schoolwork, yet ignore the role of constitutive luck?

I get uncomfortable in this section of Curren's essay, for I notice that schools are treated as neutral spaces where the focus is on how well the students do (depending on their abilities and choices), but the schools themselves are not questioned, nor the other social institutions in students' lives that impact their choices. Curren recognizes that in unjust societies institutions fail to measure up to their constitutive responsibilities, but he chooses to focus more on when we should begin to hold students accountable for their choices than to consider further how we go about holding our social institutions accountable for their failures to measure up.

Curren wants to impose responsibility on K–12 schools through educational guidelines that do not allow children to make educational choices that diminish their opportunities, a position similar to Mortimer Adler's in *The Paideia Proposal*.¹ It comes as no surprise that Aristotle's voice enters the discussion here concerning the nature of responsibility. Adults are given the constitutive responsibilities of "supervising to ensure that children do the right thing so they can develop well." Troubling to this type of argument is the assumption of agreement on those educational guidelines. My own work with three broad cultural groupings that have the highest drop-out rates in U.S. schools (Mexican, African, and Native Americans) has underscored the diversity of values held by students, extended family members, and staff concerning educational purposes and guidelines.² When those values conflict, children are asked to choose among their family's, community's, or school's values. Success means different things to different cultures; it means a responsible child who helps take care of family needs and is a good person, someone who knows how to live a balanced life in harmony with nature, or someone who is on time, gets good grades in school, and goes to college. An imposed set of educational guidelines that does not allow children to make choices for fear they will make poor choices does not allow for diverse values, nor does it trust the child to have the chance to learn how to make good choices.

Curren concludes that OA could support his concept of "ethically appropriate evaluation policies, by encouraging productive and motivating supervision of students' intellectual development, and by providing exit exams or other forms of evaluation that could serve as credentials." With the right ends in view and the right means of measuring, OA might serve the purposes of justice, but, only "if schools are able to rise to the demands of educating all students adequately."

I believe that schools will never rise to the demands of educating all students adequately unless we recognize that schools are just one of many social institutions in children's lives, and that schools reflect the injustices of the greater society. Children born into poverty attend schools that look, smell, sound, and feel different than their richer cousins. Police officers patrol their halls and escort their rival sports teams across town to play against them, in the safer daytime hours. Their teachers are treated differently by their administration (asked to clock in and out, lectured on how they dress, called out on the public address system for unscheduled meetings and assemblies). The curriculum is geared to the high-stakes tests, for if students don't do well on them, their teachers are replaced and their school is reconstituted.

And, who helps them cope with the stresses in their lives when they walk out of that school building?

Curren and I agree that “OA is no remedy for a fundamental failure to invest adequately in the intellectual formation of children,” and that “at its worst, it might regiment and raise academic standards without enabling more children to achieve them.” In fact, that’s exactly what is happening with NCLB: the very children it purports to help are being hurt by NCLB policy, and so are their teachers and schools.

1. Mortimer Adler, *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto* (New York: Collier, 1982).

2. Barbara Thayer-Bacon, *Beyond Liberal Democracy in Schools: The Power of Pluralism* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008).