



JERI RIDINGS NOWAKOWSKI

Q How did you become involved in the famous Eight Year Study?

Tyler: Let me begin by describing the public mood at the time of the Great Depression in the fall of 1929, shortly after I arrived at the Ohio State University. People were worried about their material losses and blamed much of it on the banks, the government, and the schools. The newspapers were reporting how bad the schools were, and a big conference was held in 1933 on "The Crisis in Education: Will the Schools Survive?"

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On Educational Evaluation: A Conversation with Ralph Tyler

Ralph W. Tyler's leadership in education and evaluation spans half a century. In this interview, the "father of educational evaluation," now 82, explains his role in some of the more significant developments in American education, including the Eight Year Study, the General Education Development Test, National Assessment, the regional laboratory program, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences.

Since these accusations included no evidence of school decline, I wrote to the superintendents in Ohio asking them whether they had any of the tests from 25 or more years before. We found a number of communities where old tests were available, and we gave them again. We found, as was discovered in Indiana a few years ago,¹ that students did the same or better than those of the past. The public acceptance of the notion that in some way things are deteriorating seems to be due not to a presentation of facts but to the feeling of people that things are bad because they are not as well off as they expected to be.

Q: Do you feel that's true in 1983 as well?

Tyler: Yes, I do. When you look at National Assessment results, for example, you find there are more children able to read now than there were ten years ago. But the public doesn't pay as much attention to the National Assessment results as it does to the College Board report that the SAT scores were declining slightly: 30 points, which is only 2.4 points in raw score.

Q: You've brought up National Assessment, a project you began working on in the early sixties. Was National Assessment your brainchild?

Tyler: Well, I was asked to design the plans and was chairman of the exploratory committee to develop an effective operation that could be taken over by the Education Commission of the States.

Q: Has it turned out to be all that you'd hoped?

Tyler: Oh, nothing is ever all that one hopes for. But certainly it has begun to provide helpful data about the problems and progress of education in the United States.

Q: We were discussing your work at Ohio State.

Tyler: I had gone there because the Ohio legislature was concerned that half of the students who were enrolling in the freshman year never came back for the sophomore year, so they appropriated funds to be used to improve teaching and learning. I was to work half the time with faculties at the university and the other half with schools in the state. I began helping faculty members in departments that had required courses, such as botany and zoology. I would point out that the typical so-called achievement tests simply tested what students remembered about things that appeared in their textbooks. I would say, "Surely that isn't what you're after . . . you are not just teaching them to memorize." This led us to talk about the instructors' objectives—that is, what they really hoped their students would learn. Because the term "test" was usually interpreted as a collection of memory items, I suggested use of the term "evaluation" to refer to investigating what students were actually learning. As we developed evaluation instruments and began to use them, we obtained information about what students were

learning and not learning; how quickly they forgot information; and how long they remembered basic principles. This was going on during my first five years at Ohio State.

Without going deeply into the background of the Eight Year Study, one could say that it developed from a realization that the depression had brought into the schools many young people who did not plan to go to college; in fact, they didn't really want to go to high school, but they went because there was no place else to go. Youth unemployment was nearly 100 percent.

By 1929 we had reached a point where about 25 percent of an age group went to high school. In my day it had been only 10 percent, but as the depression went on, 50 percent of an age group were in high school. It doubled the enrollments. Many of these young people didn't find the curriculum for college entrance meaningful to them. And the other common program, the Smith-Hughes Vocational Education Program, was highly selective. It enrolled only those who were definitely planning a particular occupation like garage mechanics, homemaking, or agriculture.

High school principals realized that the schools should have a different program for these new students who were now in the high schools because they couldn't find work. But the course requirements of high schools then were pretty largely determined by, on the one hand, college entrance requirements and, on the other hand, the requirements of state education departments.

The Progressive Education Association, which was interested in innovations, took the responsibility of getting together a conference of school and college people, including the state departments, to determine what could be done. Out of that conference emerged the idea that a small number of schools (ultimately 30 schools and school systems) should be encouraged to develop programs designed to serve the high school students of that period. These 30 schools were to be given eight years in which to develop and try out new educational programs. During that time they would be freed from meeting the specific requirements of the state and of college entrance subjects in order to provide freedom for experimentation.

But there was a stipulation in the arrangement agreed to by the colleges and state departments: there would be an evaluation. First, records were to be available about the performance of students that would furnish information to help colleges make wise selections. Second, there would be an appraisal of what students were learning year after year in the high school so that the school would get continuing information as to whether they were learning something important. Third, there would be a follow up after graduation. The first year of the Eight Year Study (1933-34) the directing committee expected to use the General Culture Test developed by the Cooperative Test Service for the Pennsylvania Study of School and College relations. But this was just a test of information students recalled about the things presented in widely used textbooks in the various so-called basic subjects. The schools rebelled; that wasn't what they were trying to teach, so it would not be a fair measure of their efforts. They threatened to drop out of the study. This produced a crisis in the summer of 1934 at the time of the annual meeting of the participants.

At this point, a member of the directing committee, Boyd Bode, a well-known philosopher of education who had his office across the hall from me in The Ohio State University said, "We've got a young man in evaluation at Ohio State who bases evaluation on what the schools are trying to do. He works closely with them and doesn't simply take a test off the shelf. Why don't you see if he will take responsibility for directing the

evaluation?" I was interviewed and agreed to accept a half-time appointment as director of evaluation for the project.

Q: Would you say that Tylerian evaluation, as we understand it, was born during the Eight Year Study?

Tyler: Well, it depends on what people want to call Tylerian evaluation.

Q: I have heard you discuss the evaluation process when you train evaluators, and it sounds a good deal richer than the six or seven steps often used to describe objectives-based evaluation.

Tyler: Oh, surely you can't use just objectives as the basis for comprehensive evaluation, but it is very important to find out whether teachers are accomplishing their purposes. When people think of "Tylerian" as a single process it's like saying Dewey only mentioned child interests; there is no way of summarizing very simply any human being's notions about something complex. But for convenience we are likely to give a procedure a name, rather than describing it more fully.

Q: As you worked with teachers to produce objectives, you must have had an impact on curriculum.

Tyler: I think so, especially in areas where there had not been much clarity in curriculum descriptions. For example, the teachers of literature would usually repeat some trite phrase like "the students should learn to appreciate literature." I said, "Well, that sounds sensible. What do you mean by that? What have you observed that you are trying to help young people learn that you call 'appreciation'? Is it that they can tell you who wrote a book? Is it that they can make critical judgments of a literary work in terms of some criteria, such as unity or illusion of reality?" We discussed such things until we began to agree that ultimately with literature we were concerned with comprehension, interpretation, and appreciation. They meant by appreciation that readers respond emotionally and thus their lives are richer. All that came out of discussions, and from continuous reminders: "Don't look at some taxonomy to define your objectives. You're a teacher working with students. What have you found students learning that you think is important?"

"To learn something you can't use means that in the end it will be forgotten. One must consider the learners: what they have already learned, what their needs are, and what their interests are. . . ."

Q: So, it's a matter of articulating some things that teachers know how to do, have been doing, but probably need to refine. You approach educational problems with a great deal of common sense.

Tyler: The only problem with common sense is that it's so uncommon.

Q: One could say that while there might not have been a formal step for assessing the worthwhileness of objectives, that was in fact always going on in the "Tylerian" evaluation process.

Tyler: Yes, of course. The schools were helped not only by the evaluation staff but by a curriculum staff working under Professor Alberty. In 1938, the schools were saying they were getting more help from the evaluation staff than from the curriculum staff. Alberty explained this by saying: "Tyler has a rationale for evaluation and there isn't any rationale for curriculum." So when we were having lunch, I said to Hilda Taba, my right-hand associate, "Why, that's silly, of course there's a rationale for curriculum." I sketched out on a napkin what is

now often called "the curriculum rationale." It indicates that in deciding what the school should help students learn, one must look at the society in which they are going to use what they learn and find out the demands and opportunities of that society. To learn something you can't use means that in the end it will be forgotten. One must consider the learners: what they have already learned, what their needs are, and what their interests are, and build on them; one must also consider the potential value to students of each subject. After lunch I said to the curriculum people, "Here's a rationale you might want to follow," and from that outline a rationale began to be developed.

Q: It seems that in the early days of educational evaluation you really couldn't talk about evaluation without talking about curriculum; that they were completely intertwined.

Tyler: Well, if you are talking about evaluation of education, of course.

Q: But as evaluation has prospered, the two have grown apart. Educational evaluation has taken on a life of its own and is really not attending to curriculum.

Tyler: That happens in all professional fields; medical research has often forgotten the patient, who has become clinical material, and forgotten the role of the physician as a health counselor. It was as if in some way, once the physician knew what was going on in the human body, automatically the patient would get well; but we know that only the patient can get himself well—just as only the children can learn; you can't learn for them. So there is all this evaluation business up here without considering what it is the learner is doing.

The same problem exists with social work; social workers sometimes think of clients as having no minds of their own. But when, for instance, people discover that money can be had for aid to dependent children, some are tempted to say, "That's a way to make my living. I'll just have more children and get more money." You've got to consider the social situation and what it means to the so-called clients. They're not inert objects out there to be worked on. You can do that if you're working on plants, but you can't do that with human beings.

Q: Yet the federal money that moved evaluation forward brought us . . .

Tyler: Has it moved us forward?

Q: Well, it brought us large funded programs and with them program evaluation, which has grown and become more methodologically diverse. I guess the question is whether program evaluation has co-opted curriculum evaluation in the public school system.

Tyler: I think there will be much less money from the federal government for that kind of evaluation and that may help people stop chasing dollars and try to consider what is really involved in effective evaluation, and who the clients are. One of the problems is that they see the clients as being the federal government: the Department of Education, NIE, or the Congress, instead of the teachers and other people who operate schools, and the parents and children. When you have those clients, you have to have different considerations.

Q: In 1938 you moved from Ohio State back to the University of Chicago, where you had earned your doctorate. At Chicago you became chairman of the department and later dean of the Division of Social Science.

Tyler: I went there to do two things. One was to head the Board of Examinations responsible under the Chicago plan for determining students' completion of their educational programs. The other was to take Mr. Judd's place, who was retiring, and so to be head of Education.

Q: Egon Guba said to me that while people know you as a researcher, a theoretician, and a statesman, you were also a wonderful administrator and a very good dean. Did you enjoy administration?

Tyler: Yes, if you define administration as Lord Acton did: "the art of the possible." I like to help people find ways of using their talents most effectively, and that's usually by giving them an opportunity for a time to do what they think is important. Then, from that experience, try to clarify what they can do best in that context.

I think that Guba was especially influenced by his own major Professor, Jacob Getzels. I found Getzels teaching social psychology in the Department of

Human Relations at Harvard and brought him to Chicago. He said he was a social psychologist and asked, "What do you want me to do?" I said, "I don't want you to teach anything until you feel you've got something to teach. I'd like to have you go around to schools and see what is going on in education that could be understood by utilizing social psychology." He told me later that he didn't really believe me, so when the quarter started he said, "What am I to teach?" I said, "Whatever you feel is important to people in education." "Well, I don't know." "Until you find that, just go on observing schools and talking to school staff." So this went on until he felt he had something to teach teachers.

Q: So you were a facilitator?

Tyler: That's what an administrator should be: a person who helps make possible what others dream and hope they can do. I might name a good many others I tried to help; for example, Herb Thelan. I found him teaching chemistry in the university high school in Oakland and again I had him, before he taught anything, observe what was going on in teaching. He became interested in the interaction of students and teachers. He said he wanted to work on that, so I set up a laboratory in which interactions in the classroom could be observed and recorded; a place in the laboratory school where he could study different groups of students. We didn't have videotape in those days but we had audiotape and we had ways of looking through one-way mirrors and so on. So he began to have a chance to do what he had discovered to be interesting.

Q: I'm moving through your life too rapidly. I was about to take you to 1953, when you became Director of the Center for Advanced Studies.

Tyler: But you may want to understand that during the war I was also Director of the Examinations Staff to develop educational testing for the armed forces. The GED Test was developed there, guided by Everett Lindquist of the University of Iowa.

We originally developed GED so that young people who were returning from military service after the second world war would have a chance to demonstrate what they'd learned and get some credit for it.

“Kids have to learn to take responsibility and take the consequences when they make a mistake; that’s the way they learn.”

Q: You were also instrumental—you and Frank Chase—in beginning regional labs in our country.

Tyler: Yes, in 1964 Lyndon Johnson set up a task force headed by John Gardner to see what needed to be done in education. I was responsible for writing the section on laboratories, the substance of which was included in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. We viewed laboratories as the “middlemen” between research and schools. We already had the R and D Centers in which educational research and development was supported. What we needed was a way by which the consumers—the schools—could identify problems they had and seek help from research of the past as well as the present. The laboratories were to represent the consumers, but the laboratories that were actually funded were, with some exceptions, oriented toward the producers of research rather than the consumers. We still lack “middlemen” in most regions.

Q: From 1953 to 1963 you were Director of the Center for Advanced Studies. What were the Center’s major contributions during that decade before you began work on National Assessment?

Tyler: Providing an opportunity for very able behavioral scientists to spend time thinking and studying when they were not responsible for teaching and other services based on their previous work. At the Center they could think about what they needed next and get ideas for future development.

Q: So once again you nurtured people so they could do good things in education and research.

Tyler: Well, nurture is a term that depends on how suppliant you think they are. And, of course, don’t forget the basic political principle that has guided many pressure groups in seeking government funds—when a sow is suckling a pig, the sow enjoys it as much as the pig.

Q: I like that one. Tell me, when you look back on a career that has already had so many pinnacles . . .

Tyler: I don’t think there are pinnacles.

Q: Would you buy tiny hills?

Tyler: I don’t think of them that way at all. I was just doing what seemed important at the time.

Q: Just plodding along with Ralph Tyler. Is there something that gives you a special sense of personal accomplishment?

Tyler: I never thought of it in those terms.

Q: If you don’t think about accomplishments in a personal sense, what about as contributions to education?

Tyler: I thought they were useful, but I never tried to examine them.

Q: You don’t rank order?

Tyler: No, I certainly don’t.

Q: Okay. But you’ve often been referred to in the literature as the father . . .

Tyler: I invented the term “evaluation” when applied to educational procedures; so if naming the child, as the godfather names babies, makes you father, then I am. And when it began to be a cliché and evaluation meant so many different things to different people, I began using the term “assessment.”

Q: Well, that’s what I wanted to ask: the amount of paternal responsibility you take for this offspring that is credited to you.

Tyler: You can’t take responsibility for what other people do, so the only thing you can do when anything becomes a cliché is to get a new word.

Q: And that’s “assessment”?

Tyler: Right now its assessment, but that will become a cliché too because many people quickly catch on to forms and labels without understanding the substance of something.

Q: Speaking of labels, there are a growing number in evaluation. I think Michael Scriven said that, at one count, there were over 50 evaluation models. We have at least two major professional evaluation organizations; we have a number of evaluation journals, and several sets of standards. Do you think this is progress?

Tyler: Probably not. It depends on whether evaluation has become so popular that it’s a fad and is likely to fade. However, there will be people who really are concerned with finding out what is going on in our educational program and want to understand it. That’s what science is about—trying to find out what’s really going on.

Q: If you were to run a major project tomorrow, would you hire someone called an evaluator to work with you on the project?

Tyler: It depends on whether the person could do what needed to be done.

Q: What kind of a job description would that be?

Tyler: Evaluation is a very broad term—what is it that needs to be done?

Q: Let’s talk about the need for educational statespersons and how to get them.

Tyler: You might want to talk first about why some situations produce more statesmen than others. Amos advanced a theory in his book of the Bible that in periods of affluence (he described vividly how women flaunted their jewelry), people were no longer interested in God because they could satisfy their wants easily. The great ethical period for the Jews was in their Babylonian captivity. The general theory, which is hard to refute because it seems to fit so many historic periods, is that the human being is both an animal that, like other animals, depends upon various physical

things—food, for example—and is greatly attracted to material possessions but also is capable of immense efforts to attain goals that are nonmaterial: concern for others, unselfishness, altruism, and so on. In times when it's easy to satisfy the material wants, people generally become greatly attached to material things. In difficult times, when the physical gratifications are not easily obtained, more time is spent in seeking nonmaterial goals.

John Dewey pointed out that people are problem solvers. They're not just cows that chew their cud after a nice meal in the pasture. People have been able to meet new environmental problems when other organisms perished because they couldn't adapt. This suggests that the environment in which people will continue to develop is one where goals require effort and problems must be solved.

Now, that's a theory of history that may be useful in this connection. Look back at the times we've had people we call statesmen. For example, in the case of Horace Mann, it was when there was a great expansion in the elementary school system of Massachusetts. They didn't have enough teachers, and he had to solve the problem of how to educate teachers, so he invented the normal schools. But during the periods before that, when there wasn't a great expansion and when there weren't problems of educating teachers, they didn't have any demand for persons to lead them in new ways.

Q: If times are getting bad, are we about to see the emergence of some new statesmen?

Tyler: The times ahead are likely to be austere, but that does not mean they necessarily will be bad for education or for people who care about serving others. Those are things that can become better during periods of austerity.

Q: So the funding hiatus in education might in fact help us?

Tyler: It's probably going to produce better education.

Q: What are the major problems of American education K-12?

Tyler: We are still struggling with reaching all the children of the whole population. The civil rights movement has made us conscious of a lack of adequate service for various minority groups.

That's still with us, and it is likely to be with us for some time because of the increased number of illegitimate children born to teenage mothers who won't be able to provide a background for their children unless their grandparents bring them up. We're going to have a lot of children coming in who do not have the background in the home that we've been accustomed to, so that's certainly a problem—the education of so-called disadvantaged children.

The second problem we've got to work on more effectively is the transition of youth into constructive adult life, which means being able to move easily from school to work, being able to accept and carry on effectively the responsibilities of citizenship, of all aspects of adult life. We have continually tried to keep youth off the labor market, and we've continually tried to lengthen their period of childhood without allowing them to gradually assume more responsibilities. Kids have to learn to take responsibility and take the consequences when they make a mistake; that's the way they learn.

A third problem, greatly related to it, is the problem of rebuilding the total

educational environment for children. What's happened with changes in the home; with mothers' employment? What's happened with television taking the place of more constructive recreation? We've got to rebuild that environment because the demands for education are far greater than can be met in the limited time available in school.

Why don't we stop with those three. I could add some more if you wish; they're enough to keep us busy and happy for some time.

Q: Thank you, I've enjoyed it.

Tyler: Now, fine, can we make a date for a later time . . .

Q: Sure . . .

Tyler: And a different place . . . □

Roger Farr, "Is Johnny's/Mary's Reading Getting Worse?" *Educational Leadership* 34 (April 1977): 521-527.

This article is adapted from "An Interview with Ralph Tyler," by Jeri Ridings Nowakowski, Occasional Paper Series, The Evaluation Center, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo.

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