Evaluation as Normative Practice

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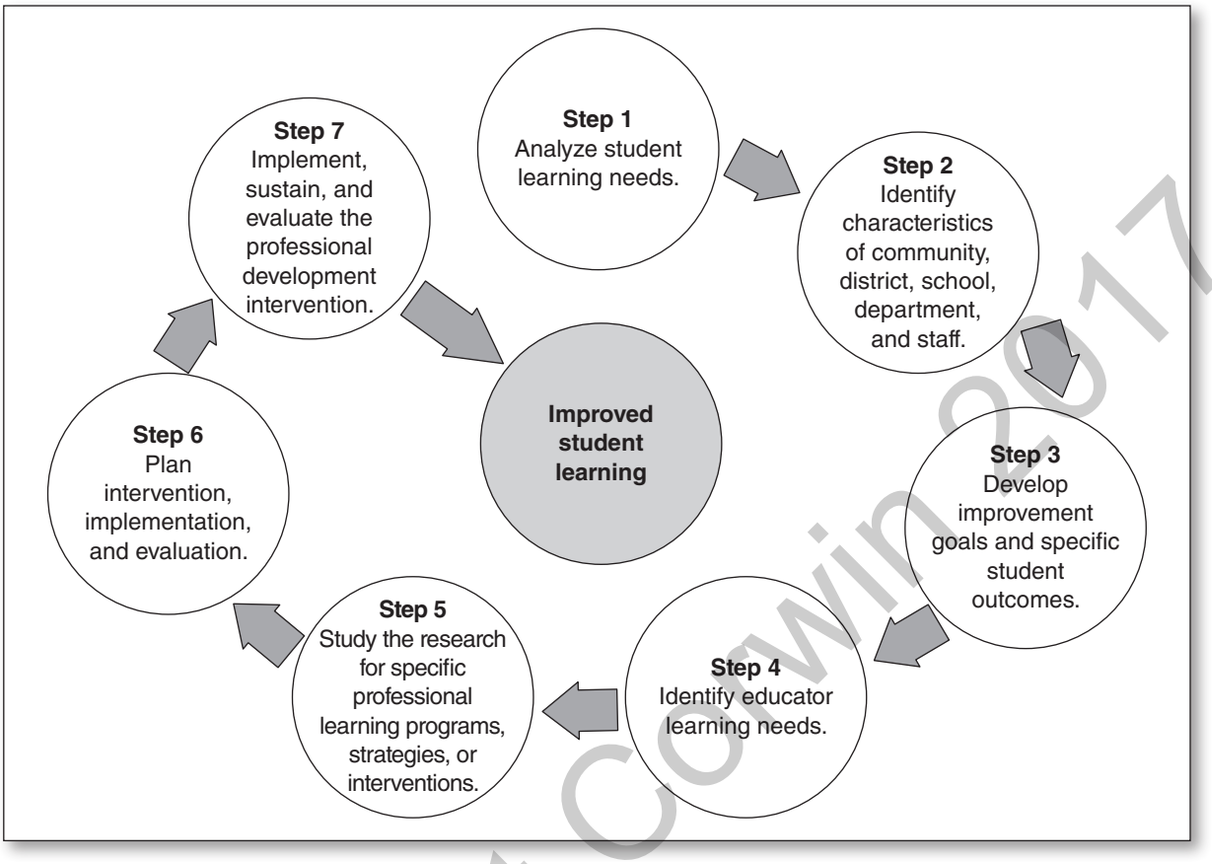
Educators in states, school systems, and schools work tirelessly to meet the learning needs of every student. Yet, some students continue to struggle. To achieve their vision of success for every student, educators are increasingly using data to understand and pinpoint opportunities for increasing the effectiveness of their efforts and to make savvy decisions about education programs to implement. Rather than assigning blame elsewhere or shirking their responsibility, they double down on their commitment to be accountable to their **stakeholders**, especially students and their families. They cringe each time they see **results** that disappoint them and acknowledge that the education they are providing is leaving some students behind.

Yet what educators choose to do when they face this situation is perhaps the most crucial decision of all. Rather than grasping at anything available or what is easy and familiar, educators become more deliberate and engage in focused continuous improvement. They use available data to understand where the needs are and their root causes. They investigate evidence-based programs that provide results. They analyze the **context** in which their schools exist to assess the resources, culture, facilities, equipment, and human and social capital that will influence their efforts. Using all this information, they plan thoroughly for implementing **professional learning programs** with high levels of promise. In conjunction with their planning, they simultaneously plan how they will monitor implementation and evaluate their progress and results to address the gaps they have identified. As the professional learning programs are implemented, they review progress, make adjustments, and measure impact on educators and students.

This **backmapping process** (Killion, 1999; Killion & Roy, 2009) for the design, implementation, and **evaluation of professional learning** appears in a variety of forms and by various names. It describes the process for using data to identify needs, understanding context, studying **research** and evidence, planning a program to address needs, implementing the program, monitoring progress, and evaluating effects (see Figure 1.1). This process acknowledges that program selection or planning occurs only after deep analysis of student, educator, and system data. Not only do educators identify where

Figure 1.1 Backmapping Model



Killion, J. (1999). *What works in the middle: Results-based staff development.* Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

gaps exist in student learning, but they also identify which students are in greatest need, what the most likely root causes are for the existing gaps, and which learning outcomes will eliminate the gaps. They also understand what educator factors and system factors are influencing the results and are in most need of addressing. For example, if most teachers in schools with the highest percentage of students who are underperforming are those with the lowest level of experience, how will program leaders address this factor in designing and implementing professional learning? If teachers have insufficient time for collaboration, a core research-supported component of increasing the quality of teaching within a school, how will the school's leadership team and district leadership team address this potential inhibitor before the program is implemented? Other similar processes such as the cycle of continuous improvement (Killion & Roy, 2009; Learning Forward, n.d.a), Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) (Deming, 1994), or improvement science (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015) focus on shorter cycles of learning, experimentation, and implementation to make ongoing improvements in routine work.

Changes in the *Every Student Succeeds Act* increase state, local education agency, and school leaders' responsibility to evaluate professional learning to improve student academic success, assessment, accountability, school improvement, teacher and leader effectiveness, and use of federal, state, and local

resources. While increasing states' flexibility, the law holds tight on states' accountability to ensure that every student succeeds. It calls for better use of evidence, ongoing commitment to improvement, and engagement of stakeholders. It requires states rather than the federal government to determine criteria and **interventions** for schools in need of improvement and holds the expectation that districts develop evidence-based strategies to address their needs.

Relevant to this book, *ESSA* redefines professional learning to include personalized, job-embedded, ongoing, available to all teachers of all content areas (including administrators and other school staff), collaborative, informed by educator input and data, integrated into school improvement plans, and regularly evaluated. It requires states to use evidence to select programs to address identified needs and to submit a description annually on how their selected activities "improved teacher, principal, or other school leader effectiveness" (S. 1177, Sec. 2104, Ia). This description is a form of evaluation.

As the focus on educator effectiveness increases, the importance of effective professional learning grows as does the need for its evaluation. No longer will **documentation** about participation levels or satisfaction **surveys** serve to substitute for learning and impact. Hayes Mizell (2003) makes this point clear in his article, "Facilitator: 10; Refreshments 8; Evaluation 0." He says, "Workshop satisfaction misses the point. Evaluation means understanding what **participants** learn, when and how they apply the learning, and when and how it benefits students" (p. 10). He calls upon professional learning leaders to invest in their own learning about effective evaluation and how to use it. He notes that there are two overarching reasons for this investment. First, he notes is the continued realignment of resources that often result in reduction of funding for professional learning. Second, he adds, is the increasing pressure to educate all students to high levels, and that this requires ensuring that all educators have the capacity to meet the needs of all students.

Overly simplistic, event-focused perception surveys may produce data, yet they are not the types of data that will enable professional learning leaders to answer their most pressing questions. Data are most useful when they are placed within the context of a systematic investigation of programs and processes. Evaluation—not just data—is increasingly important for reforming schools because evaluation, when thorough, provides state, school system, and school leaders answers to questions about the impact of their efforts. Evaluation, as a critical part of an ongoing improvement process, provides leaders insights into what is working and what is not, and information to make better decisions.

Leaders interested in evaluation sit in every chair in education. A 10th-grade student evaluates the pieces of work in his portfolio to select one which best exhibits his effort to conduct a science lab to solve a problem. A fourth-grade teacher, implementing a new mathematics instructional practice to make student thinking visible, learned in a summer workshop, is evaluating its effectiveness by watching how her weakest students respond when she uses the practice so she can ask her coach for more specific support when they meet next week. The English department at the high school uses evaluation to assess its implementation of a series of lessons on argumentation to understand how to adapt those lessons in the future to address student misconceptions and ensure more students are successful in writing arguments. The middle school

leadership team has implemented a research-based social-emotional skills program, one of the additional criteria beyond student achievement required now in their district for schools in need of improvement, and wants to measure its success with their students and to report to parents, central office, the school board, the state education agency, and the local community foundation that funded the program about their results. The district talent development chief implemented a five-year evaluation of the teacher and principal mentorship program to know if the program is achieving its intended results and is sufficiently resourced. The regional education agency is initiating a program to increase the capacity of paraprofessionals to support literacy instruction in preK and wants to measure its effectiveness.

Evaluation uses data to answer specific questions to create potential for transforming teaching, learning, leadership, and the systems that support them. It is not data alone that transform. Consider this simple analogy. More people are sporting wearables to measure many types of active and passive activities, such as heart rate, distance walked, hours of movement, and sleep patterns, and are logging more and more information such as caloric intake, emotional state, and so on. The apps used even provide daily or weekly reports. Yet it is not these data that will change a person's health, well-being, or activity level. It is interpreting and using the data to make changes where needed, **comparing** last week's to this week's results to know if progress is evident, and to know if one's goals are met. Simply logging caloric intake will not reduce weight, yet logging it, reviewing the data, and acting on the data will have a role in changing behavior. The same is true for professional learning. Knowing that 92 percent of school principals appreciated the district conference day options available to them will not provide information about whether they reflected on how to integrate the new practices, applied their learning on a routine basis, and realized changes in teacher or student learning as a result of their new leadership practices.

Districtwide data management systems make data more readily accessible to educators. As a result, more data conversations are occurring in schools. Data walls display color-coded levels of student performance in a variety of subject areas are frequently visible in schools. Yet, the presence of data alone, however, does little to improve educator practice or student learning. Two missing elements limit the potential of data. Often missing from data conversations is a decision about a planned, purposeful set of actions to address identified needs. *ESSA* requires more careful selection of evidence-based interventions, programs, or practices. Non-regulatory guidance specifies four levels of evidence that states and districts can use for selecting interventions to address school improvement and student learning. The levels are presented in Table 1.1.

Also missing from data conversations is a plan for evaluation. There are several types of evaluations needed to select, implement, and measure outcomes of an intervention. **Planning evaluation** involves data analysis and interpretation to identify the specific problem or needs to address and understand the context or conditions in which an intervention will be implemented. It results in the selection of an evidence-based program to address the identified problem or need. Designing the implementation and outcomes evaluation occurs simultaneously with implementation planning for the selected intervention and results in an evaluation framework; a clear and detailed plan to conduct rigorous, systematic,

Table 1.1 Definition of Levels of Evidence

Level	*Description*
Strong evidence	Supported by a minimum of one well-designed, well-implemented experimental, randomized control trial study that meets the *What Works Clearinghouse* standards without reservations
Moderate evidence	Supported by a minimum of one well-designed, well-implemented quasi-experimental study that meets the *What Works Clearinghouse* standards with reservations
Promising evidence	Supported by a minimum of one correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias that use analytic methods to compare the intervention group with a non-intervention group
Demonstrated rationale	Supported by a well-specified logic model, based on research or evaluation, that demonstrates that the intervention is likely to improve relevant outcomes

Adapted from U.S. Department of Education. (2016, September 16). *Non-regulatory guidance: Using evidence to strengthen education investments*. Washington, DC: Author. https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/guidanceuseseinvestment.pdf.

and purposeful data gathering; analysis and interpretation; report of **findings** to stakeholders; and use of findings to make improvements. The evaluation framework begins with posing the questions that stakeholders want to answer about the intervention and its use. The framework clarifies what data are needed, from whom, how often, and how much. It specifies how data will be analyzed and interpreted to measure merit, worth, progress, and impact to improve their efforts.

Because many who work in professional learning are action-oriented, they tend to focus on what to do rather than the results they want to achieve. Process becomes more important than results. They tend to think about short-term accomplishments rather than long-term results. They are comfortable reporting what they have done rather than what results they are producing. More effort is allocated to selecting and launching interventions than to implementing and sustaining them. Yet repeatedly professional learning leaders are being held to high **standards** of accountability for their efforts and are asked for evidence of results. The evaluation process described in this book supports these leaders in all phases of evaluation to meet the accountability expectations, specifically for **practitioners** who want to add evaluation to their routine work.

Implementing evaluation as a natural component of all professional learning encourages and supports systematic review, study, and analysis of professional learning to improve outcomes, accountability, equity in access and quality, effectiveness, and efficiency. Evaluation, when it is normative practice, shifts the focus of professional learning leaders from a service orientation (What can we do to meet the unique needs of the education workforce? What is available and when? Who participates? How accessible are the options? How aligned are the learning options with the school system's strategic priorities?) to a results orientation (How are educator practices changing? What supports are increasing changes in practice? What else is changing within the system to

support educator changes in professional practice? How are changes in educator practice influencing student success?)

Leaders of professional learning who integrate evaluation into their normative practice make more informed decisions, respond more quickly to challenges that may interfere with results, use clearly defined outcomes as the primary measure of their success, and keep a laser-like focus on those results. When results are the driver, expectations are clearer and efforts are more aligned. Stephan Bauer, a management consultant, notes, "Results-oriented leaders know how to create systems, build coalitions, motivate employees, monitor performance for effectiveness, and be responsible for results. Organizations and leaders can develop this capacity by constantly asking themselves questions such as:

- What does our organization truly value? How do we prove a consistent commitment to these values in all our work?
- What is our organizational vision for the world? How do we measure progress toward that vision?
- How are we engaging with others toward the realization of our vision in a way that helps us achieve more together than we can individually?
- How do we seek learning, and how does that learning inform how we continually improve our practice and organization?
- How do we engage our staff in conversations about the qualities it takes to lead, and provide them safe space to struggle with the practice of leadership?" (Bauer, 2014).

Evaluation is, as Posavac (2016) says, like breathing. Everyone does it all the time. Yet evaluators approach this work with purpose and intentionality to measure and understand authentic issues that matter most. Donna Mertens and Amy Wilson (2012) state, "Evaluators' ways of thinking are different from ordinary daily decision making, because they engage in a process of figuring out what is needed to address challenges through the systematic collection and use of data" (p. 3). Professional learning leaders who engage in ongoing evaluation as a natural part of their work are results-oriented leaders committed to increasing the success of every member of the education workforce and each student they serve.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. How do we currently evaluate professional learning?
2. Who is primarily responsible for evaluating professional learning?
3. What data are we using regularly to examine professional learning?
4. How do we engage stakeholders in decisions about the development, implementation, and evaluation of professional learning?
5. How do we choose interventions for school improvement, professional learning, student learning, or other identified needs?
6. What might be a goal we set for ourselves about improving our use of evaluation so that it is more normative practice?