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ABSTRACT

In the schools, the primary clients are the students. Other clients include parents, citizens, the community, and educators--all stakeholders in the processes and the products of schools. Professionals in administrative, instructional, and student services are committed to serving these internal and external clients by providing for offerings and outcomes to advance and enhance learning and the learning experience. To ensure effective planning, implementation, and evaluation of these provisions for clients, certain principles and guidelines for beliefs and behaviors are adopted. These principles and guidelines are identified as ethical standards and codes of conduct. This chapter examines professional ethics, specifically as they relate to educational assessment. (Contains 41 references.) (GCP)

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Applications of Professional Ethics in Educational Assessment

By
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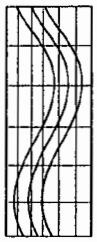

Chapter 25
Applications of Professional Ethics in Educational Assessment

Pat Nellor Wickwire

In the schools, the primary clients are the students. Other clients include parents, citizens, the community, and educators—all stakeholders in the processes and the products of schools. Professionals in administrative, instructional, and student services are committed to serving these internal and external clients by providing for offerings and outcomes to advance and enhance learning and the learning experience.

To ensure effective planning, implementation, and evaluation of these provisions for clients, certain principles and guidelines for beliefs and behaviors are adopted. These principles and guidelines are identified as ethical standards and codes of conduct. *Ethical standards* are broad statements of professional norms, whereas *codes of conduct* are focused statements of professional applications. Generally, professional associations develop, adopt, and enforce both codes and standards, and the continuation of an individual's association membership and professional status are dependent upon the observance of these guidelines. Ethical standards and codes of conduct are upheld through honor first, regulation second, and enforcement third.

Cardinal Principles of Professional Ethics

Professionals in the schools are charged with significant responsibilities and rights. As they work with and influence the lives of others, they honor cardinal principles inherent in professional ethics: beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy, justice, and fidelity (Kitchener, 1984). *Beneficence* involves contributing positively to the welfare, growth, and development of clients—in other words, seeking and creating benefits and doing good. *Nonmaleficence* refers to avoiding conditions or actions that hurt, hinder, or place clients at risk—in other words, resisting and refraining from nonbenefits, or doing no harm. *Autonomy* involves securing optimal freedom of choice, action, and

consequence for clients—in other words, supporting self-determination and not resisting or interfering with decisions. *Justice* involves offering all clients equal access to opportunity—in other words, providing and ensuring respect and dignity and being fair. *Fidelity* involves maintaining loyalty and honoring agreements with clients—in other words, offering and guaranteeing trustworthiness and being faithful.

In their working relationships with clients, therefore, professionals strive to do good, do no harm, support self-determination, be fair, and be faithful. They recognize the possibilities and opportunities inherent in ethical standards and codes of conduct for clients, for the profession, and for themselves. They clarify their worldviews, establish internal and external constructs for engagement, and conduct self-review. They recognize that law supersedes ethics, and in cases where the two differ, attend, inform, and initiate dialogue, and correction to bring them into alignment.

Individual Practitioners and Professional Ethics

Theory and practice in ethics ultimately reside in the individual. In deciding what to think, feel, and do, the individual practitioner views ethical principles and conduct guidelines and their implications for personal beliefs and behaviors, as well as framing and responding to a hierarchy of universal values, societal norms, and individual desires. Organizations, agencies, institutions, and employers may possess and exercise points of view, but the final decision about professional conduct resides within the individual (Van Zandt, 1990). Peer beliefs and behaviors, and institutional encouragement and enforcement, are influential in decision making, but the final decision rests with the individual and his or her capacity, nature, and degree of subscribed obligation.

An individual's ethical thoughts, feelings, and actions may be proactive or reactive, formal or informal, explicit or implicit, reasoned or intuitive, and reflective or responsive. Thought, feeling, and action are internalized and personalized to issues, situations, and critical incidents; based on a progression of awareness, accommodation, and action; and related to sensitivity, motivation, and constancy. Thought, feeling, and action represent affective and cognitive reasoning and judgment; and, ideally, they are consistent, relevant, coherent, authentic, integrated, comprehensive, systematic, intentional, and congruent in terms of values, attitudes, and behaviors. Intuitively and critically, they address what is good and what is evil for humankind (universal values),

what is desirable and not desirable for the immediate and expanded environment (societal norms), and what is wanted and not wanted for the self (individual desires). An individual uses them to evaluate the possibility and credibility of neutrality, and to establish priorities and balance of values, attitudes, and behaviors in decisions and actions.

In developing and practicing ethics, the individual makes choices based on a hierarchy of orientations (Kohlberg, 1969, 1972):

Punishment and obedience orientation. Do it because you'll be punished if you don't. Do it because someone tells you to.

Naive instrumental hedonism. Do it because you've learned or habituated to the behavior. Do it because it makes you feel good or rewarded.

Interpersonal concordance. Do it because there is consensus on the activity. Do it because others expect you to.

Law-and-order orientation. Do it because there are laws, mandates, directives, or other structures regulating or enforcing particular expectations.

Social-contract legalistic orientation. Do it because there is agreement. Do it because there are overtones of positive or negative consequences.

Universal ethical principle orientation. Do it because it will benefit others or society. Do it because your conscience tells you it is right and responsible.

The individual who is making choices sometimes faces conflict and indecision. To reach resolution, the individual may take the following steps: (a) identify the problem and his or her relationship to it; (b) apply the current code of ethics; (c) determine the nature and dimensions of the dilemma; (d) generate potential courses of action; (e) consider potential consequences of all options and determine a course of action; (f) evaluate the selected course of action; and (g) implement the course of action (Muratori, 2001). In this process, the individual follows and sets priorities consistent with doing good, doing no harm, supporting self-determination, being fair, and being faithful. The nature and the quality of benefits for clients are the greatest considerations. Perfect resolutions may not exist, and decisions may be difficult.

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Nevertheless, the individual cannot disregard responsibility for ethical standards and codes of conduct. Neither can the profession. The price of abdication is too high.

Educational Assessment and Professional Ethics

Educational assessment offers a significant opportunity to contribute to the welfare, growth, and development of the primary clients and stakeholders of the schools—the students—and to support the efforts and contributions of the team made up of the other clients and stakeholders of the schools. The finding of essential information through educational assessment serves to enhance and advance learning and the learning experience.

Educational assessment is accomplished by sampling student learning of a sample of content in a specified domain under given conditions. The demonstration of student learning and the selection of content and conditions are planned and inferred to be representative of the domain for the individuals, groups, programs, systems, and units of systems that participate in the assessment.

A variety of norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, traditional, alternative, formative, summative, literal, and expressive formal and informal assessments, using oral, written, and psychomotor response modes, are applied in the assessment effort. They include standardized tests, standards-based tests, educator-designed tests, tests of proficiency levels with specified criteria, mastery tests, hands-on performance tests, minimum competency tests, constructed-response tests, anecdotal records, rating scales, observations of behavior, sociometrics, benchmark skill and competency tests, self-reports, questionnaires, demonstrations, projects, exhibits, experiments, inventories, card sorts, structured interviews, focused interviews, critical incident reports, and portfolios, among others. Tests may be framed longitudinally or cross-sectionally, and may use various formats to elicit and validate evidence of student learning.

Information gathering through educational assessment is directed toward identifying the current characteristics of students and, with other available information about students, toward identifying viable options for optimizing student learning. Information about factors in the environment and about alternatives for student interaction with the environment is also operative. Generally, educational assessment leads to analysis and diagnosis, planning and prescription, implementation and intervention, and evaluation and recycling. The intent is to identify

and create the best possible student learning in the best possible conditions.

Certain steps, typically sequential, occur in educational assessment: (a) selection of the assessment instrument or instruments; (b) preparation for assessment; (c) administration of assessment, with monitoring; (d) scoring and reporting of assessment results; (e) interpretation of assessment results; (f) communication of assessment results; and (g) application of assessment results. Evaluation of assessment processes, products, and outcomes—that is, whether student learning is enhanced and advanced—is ongoing and summative, and changes are made as needs are validated. Throughout, representatives of all clients and stakeholders are involved in a team approach.

In conducting these steps in educational assessment, professionals recognize and reinforce the purpose of schooling as student learning. In assessing the processes, products, and outcomes of learning, they honor the cardinal principles of professional ethics: doing good, doing no harm, supporting self-determination, being fair, and being faithful. They follow ethical standards and codes of conduct, and develop and practice aligned policies, procedures, and behaviors (Bell, 1994a, 1994b). They stress integrity and focus on the key concepts of quality, competency, need, appropriateness, meaningfulness, authenticity, accuracy, clarity, equity of opportunity, and outcomes. They seek to design, implement, and evaluate educational assessment as a value-added component to advance and enhance student learning. For the greatest effectiveness, they follow ethical standards, guidelines, and practices. A brief, selected review of ethics applicable to educational assessment follows.

Selection of Assessments

Establishment of the specific purpose or purposes of educational assessment is primary in the selection of the assessment instrument or instruments. The parameters of why, what, who, when, where, how, and how much are addressed in this initial step. The needed or desired information about student learning, the content domain, the participants, the intended use of results, and the contributions to be made through gaining the assessment information are identified.

A thorough search, review, and evaluation of available and constructible instruments is then conducted. This step involves studying the various assessments' relevance, utility, cost effectiveness, required resources, currency, strengths, and limitations. The professional test user evaluates the documentation provided regarding instrument

development and applications, and reviews expert appraisals of the instrument. The professional gains hands-on experience with the instrument and background materials to evaluate function, appearance, nondiscrimination and equity for the participant population, meaningfulness of score reporting, representativeness of the domain sample, item presentation, scoring and reporting capability, comparison groups, anticipated reception by clients and stakeholders, necessary staff and other resource support, and other relevant factors. Throughout the professional is seeking an appropriate and workable fit, with the highest quality and the greatest benefit. A report that includes conclusions and recommendations, the rationale, and the decision-making model is written, disseminated, and acted upon.

Preparation and Administration

Professional preparation is structured, complete, accurate, precise, and geared to the end of ensuring equitable opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning. Student preparation is limited to test-taking skills and to the content domain, and restricted from familiarity with specific assessment items (Bell, 1994a, 1994b).

Complete disclosure to clients and stakeholders is essential before the administration of an assessment. Disclosure includes but is not limited to purpose, applications, consequences, and expected outcomes; scoring and record keeping; availability and access to results; projected dissemination of results; rights and responsibilities; any prohibitions and assurances; and any situational information. Written consent or verification of receipt of disclosure is sometimes required.

Policies and procedures are developed and practiced by all stakeholders. Test administrators receive training in test administration, monitoring of test takers, and enforcement of administration guidelines to ensure uniformity of preparation and administration within prescribed conditions. Students are offered individualized instructions, accommodations, and exclusions only as permissible. Security of instruments is required, with precise accounting.

Scoring and Reporting

In scoring and reporting the results of an assessment, accuracy, clarity, and timeliness are essential. Meaningfulness is enhanced by providing complete information about the scoring process and rationale, types of scores, schedule and format for reporting, and method and understandability of the presentation of results.

It is important to institute quality control measures, and in case of error or contamination of performance, to ensure immediate full correction and communication. Results are released only to those who have the need and the right to know, as well as the capacity and responsibility to apply the results in decision making. Conditions for confidentiality and appeal are established, communicated, and implemented.

Interpretation

In the interpretation of assessment results, the professional makes only those inferences that are valid for the assessment instrument or instruments; the professional also recognizes that these inferences are valid only if all specified standards, guidelines, policies, and procedures have been followed. Those individuals responsible for interpretation must be trained and educated in educational assessment, know the characteristics of the assessment instrument or instruments, understand the meaning of the scores and results, know their relevance to possible and probable applications and consequences, be able to relate their meaning to environmental alternatives, and have the capacity to estimate their weight in establishing implications and making decisions. Only those individuals competent to provide interpretation do so; and they recognize the importance of informed, objective, and timely interpretation. These professionals pay strict attention to standards, guidelines, policies, and procedures; conduct monitoring for quality control; and immediately correct any errors in accuracy and completeness. Those who participated in the assessment, or their parents or guardians, receive written and oral statements about their results. In decision making, multiple sources of information and prescribed steps are used.

Communication

In communicating the results of assessment, it is important to emphasize information relevant to the advancement and enhancement of student learning. Communication of results includes accurate and meaningful descriptions about the purpose of the information gathered about student characteristics, and about the usefulness of the characteristics of the assessment instrument or instruments. The professional couches the results in clear and understandable terms, addresses the validity and reliability of results, relates them to systemic-environmental alternatives, and references possible and probable implications and consequences for students and the other clients and

stakeholders of the schools.

Professionals inform test users and test takers about the rights and responsibilities associated with assessment, including confidentiality, privacy, dissemination, and access. They demonstrate competence in technical and communication skills and knowledge, and use a team approach that involves school, home, and community. They reinforce respect and dignity; recognizing that the need and right to know, and the capacity and responsibility to apply assessment results, vary among different audiences of clients and stakeholders. Where necessary, they establish adaptive parameters for communication.

Application

In applying the results of assessment, the welfare, growth, and development of students have pre-eminence. The enhancement and advancement of student learning and the learning experience are paramount. An analysis and diagnosis of each student's demonstrated strengths and limitations leads to planning and prescription, followed by implementation and intervention. Assessment results are always applied in conjunction with information from other sources.

Professionals evaluate any proposed intervention or other action in light of the nature and degree of confidence in the assessment results, that is, whether a student's performance on the assessment instrument or instruments is an appropriate, adequate, and accurate representation of his or her actual learning in the content domain, and whether the results provide sufficient evidence to support making recommendations and taking action. They plan interventions that encompass the individuals and groups, as well as the programs, systems, and units of systems that participated in assessment. Intervention involves administrative, instructional, and student services components as well as students and other clients and stakeholders. The team reviews available alternatives for student-environment interaction and, if appropriate, creates new and modified alternatives for student success, satisfaction, and productivity. This review encompasses the scope and detail of the content domain as well as the delivery of content. Following this review, the team develops appropriate strategies for delivery of the intervention through administrative, instructional, and student services channels. The parameters and the details of application are developed and communicated through a team approach involving school, home, and community.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of the processes, products, and outcomes of assessment is a requirement. This process uses formal and informal means as appropriate to conduct all five levels of evaluation: reaction, learning, behavior, results, and output. Professionals conduct both formative evaluation (ongoing and at specified interim checkpoints) and summative evaluation (at the end and with final benchmarks). All steps in assessment are targeted for review and evaluation: selection, preparation, administration, scoring, reporting, interpretation, communication, application, and evaluation.

Next professionals identify evidence of change in student learning and the learning experience, and correlate the magnitude and the direction of change with the resources used in assessment. They take a team approach to recording quality and quality control information, then communicate this information to clients and stakeholders together with recommendations for continuation or modification; decisions about making changes and recycling through the process are made through a team approach.

Resources for Professional Ethics and Educational Assessment

Several resources provide additional information about professional ethics and educational assessment. These include the professional code of the National Council on Measurement and Evaluation (1995), which is designed for members and anyone else involved in assessment. The codes of ethics of the American Counseling Association (1997), American Educational Research Association (1992), American Psychological Association (1992), American School Counselor Association (1998), American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (2001), National Association of School Psychologists (2000), and National Board for Certified Counselors (1997) include designated sections on assessment, measurement, evaluation, and research. The codes of the American Association of School Administrators (1976), National Association of Elementary School Principals (1976), National Association of Secondary School Principals (2001), National Education Association (1975), and National School Boards Association (1999) also include relevant sections.

The *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (AERA, APA, & NCME, 1999) offers thorough and detailed information on ethical practices. Documents from the American Counseling Association and Association for Assessment in Counseling (1989), Eyde et al.

(1993), and the Joint Committee on Testing Practices (2000, 2002) provide additional information. Professional publications include information on concepts and practices in assessment and ethics (see, e.g., Anastasi & Urbina, 1997; Bauernfeind, Wickwire, & Read, 1991; Garfield & Krieshok, 2001; Hymes, Chafin, & Gonder, 1991; Linn, 1993; Lyman, 1997; Westgaard, 1993; and Wiggins, 1993). Compendia of assessment instruments include descriptions as well as cross-sectional and longitudinal documentation (e.g., Impara & Plake, 1998; Keyser & Sweetland, 1984–1994; Murphy, Impara, & Plake, 1999).

Concluding Statement

Current and future challenges are emerging in the exercise of educational assessment. Among the challenges already being discussed and put into operation are efforts in accountability, including high-stakes testing (Congress of the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment, 1992; National Council on Education Standards and Testing, 1992); in technological change, including e-learning, distance education, computer-assisted assessment, computer-adaptive assessment, and media-assisted assessment (Congress of the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment, 1992; Sattem, Reynolds, Gernhardt, & Burdeshaw, 2000; Wall, 2000); and in partnerships for progress, including an emphasis on the assessment of skills and competencies in cooperation with business and industry (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991). In addressing these and other challenges, opportunities, and possibilities, professionals serve their clients best by thoughtful and thorough adherence to professional ethics. Professionals practice ETHICS: engage empowerment (E), temper tone (T), honor humanity (H), internalize integrity (I), communicate commitment (C), and synthesize standards (S) as they strive to ensure that educational assessment results in value-added benefits for student learning and the learning experience.

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