

# evaluating family life education programs

---

James Farmer

Unfortunate are people and programs that are frequently or always inappropriately evaluated. They can suffer from a lack of being appreciated. What's not appreciated is often relegated to a marginal status and given less than the full amount of deserved encouragement and support.

The worth of *some* people and programs can be determined on little other than initial impressions. The more you become familiar with them, the more those initial impressions are substantiated. In contrast, the worth or promise of *other* people and programs is less evident. Initial impressions may not hold up under close scrutiny. The more you get to know them, the less the initial conclusions are substantiated. To arrive at sound conclusions about their nature and worth, it may even be necessary to revise the *way* they're evaluated.

Family life education programs have typically been inadequately evaluated. Heavy reliance has been placed on what happens to come to the attention of program staff such as enrollment data, while little attention has been paid to evaluating other aspects of the programs. Inadequate evaluation can leave such programs vulnerable, particularly because decisions about improving them may be based on little evaluative data, or perhaps more seriously, based on invalid data. This article presents (1) false assumptions about broad-aimed educational program evaluation and (2) ways of strengthening the evaluation of family life education programs.

## **Broad-Aimed Programming**

Education for family life is "broad-aimed" because it seeks, through education, to bring about cognitive, affective, and psychomotor changes that result in changes in actual performance and in the quality of the participants' lives. According to Brannan, family life education in the United States and in other parts of the world addresses an extensive array of problems affecting family life, ranging from world

---

*James Farmer:* Associate Professor of Continuing Education, University of Illinois.

---

population increase to changing family patterns, from problems of the aging population to problems related to malnutrition and subnutrition.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to being broad-aimed, family life education is "broad in scope." According to one description of it:

Family life education is a fairly new educational specialty but one for which there is a steadily increasing demand. It is a multi-professional area of study which is developing its philosophy, content, and methodology from direct experience with families and the collaboration of such disciplines as home economics, biology, physiology, religion, anthropology, philosophy and medicine. It includes a number of specialized areas, among which are interpersonal relationships, self-understanding, human growth and development, preparation for marriage and parenthood, child rearing, socialization of youth for adult roles, decision making, sexuality, management of human family resources; personal, family and community health; family-community interaction, and the effects of change on cultural patterns.<sup>2</sup>

### **Challenging Evaluative Task**

The major focus of family life education and other forms of nontraditional education to date, according to Coombs, has been on action, with little attention being paid to evaluation.<sup>3</sup> Frequently in innovative ways, these programs have sought to provide educational assistance relevant to social problem solving. They deserve evaluation that does justice to their innovative nature. Otherwise, what should be appreciated and encouraged may well be misunderstood, misinterpreted, and jeopardized. Because these programs are hybrids—combining educational and developmental features—evaluating them in an effective and valid manner is a challenging task.

Preliminary steps are currently being taken to strengthen such evaluation approaches and methods. For example, I and 35 other participants from various parts of the world recently spent two weeks at the International Workshop for Evaluation Specialists on Nonformal Education for Family Life Planning held in Chiangmai, Thailand, during June, 1974, sponsored by the Ministry of Education of Thailand and World Education, headquartered in New York City. We tried to develop evaluation approaches and methods that would be appropriate for use in evaluating broad-aimed nontraditional educational programs. Many of the concerns and concepts described in this article were presented or developed at that workshop.

### **Blocks to Evaluation**

The current paucity of systematic evaluation of family life education and other types of nontraditional continuing education programs for adults partly results from ambivalent feelings by program administrators about evaluation. Administrators may feel the need for appropriate and valid ways to

evaluate their programs. Funding sources may urge them to evaluate their programs or have them evaluated externally. Resistance to systematic evaluation, however, may occur for various reasons.

Based on a survey of administrators of continuing education programs in the midwestern United States and on *presentations at Thailand's international workshop*, the following blocks to involvement in evaluation on the part of administrators have been identified:

1. Insufficient pressure for program accountability.
2. Inadequate understanding of broad-aimed, continuing education program evaluation and of ways to validly and feasibly conduct it.
3. Reluctance to use money, time, and/or other valuable resources on program evaluation.
4. Unwillingness to require or even ask that clients take the necessary time to provide evaluative feedback.
5. Reluctance to learn evaluative results.
6. Feeling that determining the worth of a program can be done adequately merely on a subjective and impressionistic basis.<sup>4</sup>

---

**Family life education programs have typically been inadequately evaluated. Heavy reliance has been placed on what happens to come to the attention of program staff and on enrollment data, while little attention has been paid to evaluating other aspects of the programs.**

---

These and other blocks may continue to prevent many administrators from engaging in evaluation or from having their programs systematically evaluated. Sooner or later, however, they may decide, voluntarily or from necessity, to evaluate their programs or have them evaluated for one or more of the following reasons:

1. Pressures for accountability may increase.
2. Administrators may become curious to know the consequences of their programs, based on something more than subjective and impressionistic evidence.
3. Their understanding of what's involved in the administration of broad-aimed, continuing education programs may develop to the point that they feel they can no longer do without evaluative feedback.
4. They may wish to provide evaluative feedback to learners who pay all or part of the costs of a program.
5. They may become knowledgeable about ways of validly and systematically evaluating their programs and/or identifying people capable of doing so.

For these and other reasons, administrators may overcome blocks to greater involvement in program evaluation and decide to deploy the necessary resources, request the cooperation of people involved in and knowledgeable about their programs, and otherwise increase the effectiveness of program evaluation.

### **Avoiding False Assumptions**

When the decision is made to increase the effectiveness of a broad-aimed, continuing education evaluation approach, the following assumptions concerning broad-aimed program evaluation should be avoided:

1. *More is necessarily better.* Just as more children aren't necessarily better for the well-being of a family, more evaluative feedback doesn't necessarily increase the soundness of evaluative judgments. Similarly, more courses of a particular type may only duplicate the efforts of courses already in operation.
2. *The use of "evaluative tools," such as testing, participant observation, and interviewing, in and of itself constitutes valid program evaluation.* It can't be assumed that a man pounding nails into a board in the middle of a field is necessarily building a house. To come to the conclusion that the man is house-building, you need some evidence that he's constructing a dwelling. Similarly, the conclusion that those engaged in data collection are conducting program evaluation requires evidence of an approach and methods that contribute to decision making about the worth of the program being evaluated to strengthen the program and/or establish its accountability.
3. *Evidence that a broad-aimed program has achieved relatively narrow objectives necessarily establishes its worth as a broad-aimed program.* Achieving narrowly conceived objectives, particularly when they've been derived primarily from the perspective of those who are offering a program, may well be a necessary intermediate step in the evaluation of a program. Evidence of having achieved narrowly conceived program objectives can only be taken as evidence of the worth of a broad-aimed, continuing education program to the extent that it can be reasonably concluded that attainment of those objectives has made a meaningful contribution to the recipients, from their perspective.

### **Evaluating Purposive Aspects**

In evaluating family life education programs and other types of broad-aimed, continuing education programs, it's crucial, among other things, to conclude to what extent the

program being evaluated is *purposive*—that which serves or effects “a useful end or function though not necessarily as a result of deliberate design.”<sup>5</sup>

Review of written materials about a program and interviews with its administrator and its funders, if any, generally make it possible for the evaluator to identify the planner’s expectations about the outcomes of the program development efforts. However, adults engage in continuing education for a variety of purposes and may receive educational benefits that don’t coincide with those anticipated by the planners. Further, there may be negative “side effects” for the participants that may not have been anticipated by the planners.

An effective evaluation approach should be able to identify, gather, analyze, and interpret the types of evaluative data concerning a program’s consequences described in the following hypothetical illustration.

Twenty participants acquired a particular avocational skill in a family life education program. After the completion of the program, eight of them used that skill during their leisure time in a recreational manner and felt that their lives were enriched from having done so.

Twelve of those who had received the training, however, unexpectedly quit their jobs and invested all of their life savings in self-employed ventures in which they used what they had learned in the program to make a salable product.

Six of them succeeded and were of the opinion that their lives had been considerably improved, at least in part, because of what they had learned in the program. Six of them went bankrupt in the venture and felt that the quality of their lives had worsened, at least in part, because of their involvement in trying to make a living by using what they had learned in the family life education program.

Little or no attention had been paid by those offering the course to anticipating the potential positive and negative consequences of using what was taught in the course for commercial purposes.

The *worth* of the program described above, from the point of view of its consequences to the learners, must be determined mainly from considering consequences that weren’t intended by the program planners.

---

**Innovative and apparently successful programming in family life education—a growing type of nontraditional continuing education of adults—deserves valid and effective evaluation.**

---

Evaluative conclusions about the worth of a broad-aimed, continuing education program are likely to be more useful to the extent that they reflect: (1) intended as well as unintended positive consequences of the program, (2) a tolerable lack of

## Developing Well-Balanced Evaluation

negative "side effects" attributable to the program, and (3) the efforts of program planners to anticipate and minimize negative "side effects" from the program.

A well-balanced evaluation of a broad-aimed, continuing education program will generally focus not only on the program's consequences, but also on: (1) its context, (2) inputs into the program, (3) variations in the way the program is implemented, (4) how well the program is doing in relation to its main competitors, (5) the nature and adequacy of the decision-making process in the program, and (6) other aspects of the program that are identified as being crucial in better understanding the effectiveness and benefits of the program so better decisions can be made about program improvement.

In broad-aimed, continuing education program evaluation, it has been found helpful for the evaluator initially to "appreciate"<sup>6</sup> or "mixed-scan"<sup>7</sup> the program to be evaluated and the full range of its consequences. In effect, a *broad-meshed* net is cast over the entire program and its consequences. Based on what is found and on what may already have been known about the program, administrators, participants, significant others, and the evaluators can identify the evaluative questions that they would like answered as a result of the evaluative effort. Typically, there are far too many questions to answer feasibly. One of the most difficult tasks in program evaluation is the selection of a sound and manageable number of the most important questions on which to focus the evaluation effort.

Assigning priorities to the identified evaluative questions can be helped by determining the extent to which the likely answers to each evaluative question are:

1. Considered of relatively great importance to the program's administrator and/or significant others.
2. Likely to indicate how the program has affected the participants and, in a more general sense, affected the quality of their lives and the lives of those around them.
3. Thought to be helpful in determining to what extent the program has achieved its explicit and implicit intents, as well as the nature and extent of the unintended consequences of the program.
4. Necessary to avoid distortion in understanding the system and in making judgments about the program's worth.
5. Obtainable, given the following constraints affecting the feasibility of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evaluating data:
  - a. Budgetary constraints.
  - b. Limitations of staff.
  - c. Accessibility in terms of remoteness, and willingness of persons to cooperate.

- d. Timing.
- e. The nature and extent of the pressure for a specific type of evaluative feedback.
- f. The state of the art concerning the theory and methods available to obtain a particular type of evaluative feedback, and the extent of the reliability and validity of the data collection instruments.<sup>8</sup>

---

**. . . evaluation of family life education programs is a particularly important matter because of the comprehensiveness and, in some instances, the gravity of the problems that affect families.**

---

In evaluation of broad-aimed, continuing education programs, I have found "elite and specialized interviewing," developed by Dexter,<sup>9</sup> particularly useful for dealing with the many viewpoints and consequences. This type of interviewing:

1. Stresses the interviewee's definition of the situation.
2. Encourages the interviewee to structure the account of the situation.
3. Lets the interviewee introduce his notions of what he considers relevant, instead of relying on the investigator's notions of relevance.

The use of elite and specialized interviewing can be effectively combined with field observation in deliberately seeking to obtain "imputed and verifiable" evidence of what's totally or partially attributable to the program being evaluated.

## **Conclusion**

In short, a decision-making approach to evaluation of broad-aimed, continuing education programs is recommended. Rather than the rote application of "evaluative tools," it's suggested that internal or external evaluators—administrators, and, in some instances, funders—engage collaboratively in designing "situation specific" evaluations that, to the extent feasible, are built on valid assumptions about the programs to be evaluated and about the evaluation approaches and methods of broad-aimed, continuing education programs.

It frequently takes ingenuity and perseverance to plan and conduct broad-aimed, continuing education programs. Ideally, attention is paid concurrently to the systematic and valid evaluation of such programs. All continuing education programs are evaluated, however informally and unusefully, as those associated with them make judgments about program effectiveness. Program planners who conduct effective program evaluation are likely to be leading from strength, if they are to use valid and systematically obtained evaluation feedback in demonstrating the impact of their programs and in further improving those programs.

Developing effective broad-aimed program evaluation of family life education programs is a particularly important matter because of the comprehensiveness and, in some instances, the gravity of the problems that affect families. Those seeking to affect the quality of human life need valid and systematic feedback not only on how they're doing from their own perspective, but, more importantly, on the consequences of their programs on the lives of participants and of those around them. It may well be that the next step in strengthening family life education will have to be a concerted effort to develop appropriate, feasible, and effective ways of evaluating family life education programs.

### Footnotes

1. Norejane Hendrickson and Andrew Hendrickson, "Education for Family Life," in *Handbook of Adult Education*, Robert M. Smith, George F. Aker, and J. R. Kidd, eds. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970), pp. 440-441.
2. National Commission of Family Relations of the National Council of Family Relations, "Family Life Education Programs: Principles, Plans, Procedures, A Framework for Family Life Education," *The Family Coordinator*, XVII (July, 1968), 211.
3. Philip H. Coombs, *Nonformal Education for Rural Development—Strengthening Learning Opportunities for Children and Youth* (Essex, Conn.: International Council for Educational Development, 1973).
4. Joseph Green, "Continuing Professional Education: A Comparative Analysis of the Program Development Process in Business Administration, Educational Administration and Law" (Ph.D. dissertation in progress, University of Illinois, Urbana, 1974, and Floyd Pennington, "Continuing Professional Education: A Comparative Analysis of the Program Development Process in Social Work, Teaching and Medicine" (Ph.D. dissertation in progress, University of Illinois, Urbana, 1974).
5. P. B. Grove, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Springfield, Mass.: G. and C. Merriam Co., 1961).
6. Geoffrey Vickers, *The Art of Judgment* (New York: Basic Books, 1965).
7. Amitai Etzioni, *The Active Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1968).
8. William Fuller and others, "The Learner," in *Proceedings from the International Workshop for Evaluation Specialists on Nonformal Education for Family Life Planning, Chiangmai, Thailand, June 9-23, 1974* (New York: Bangkok Ministry of Education of the Royal Thai Government and World Education, 1974).
9. L. A. Dexter, *Elite and Specialized Interviewing* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970).