

DEVELOPING AN EVALUATION HABIT OF MIND

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Abstract: In this article, we use the psychological lens of motivation to argue that mandated evaluation requirements can serve as the impetus for accountability to become synonymous with organizational improvement. We offer evidence of how the processes and practices surrounding the use of data for wise decision-making find intrinsically derived sustainability and become consolidated in an “evaluation habit of mind.” Though exploratory in intent and not designed to be definitive, illustrations are provided from Canada’s Manitoba School Improvement Program Inc. (MSIP), an initiative designed to improve the learning experiences and outcomes of secondary school students through capacity building.

Résumé: C’est dans l’optique psychologique de cerner le phénomène de la motivation que cet article propose le postulat suivant: les exigences des évaluations mandatées peuvent servir d’élan pour que la responsabilité devienne synonyme de l’amélioration d’une organisation. L’article met en évidence comment les processus et les pratiques adoptées lors de l’utilisation des données pour fins décisionnelles mènent à une viabilité intrinsèque qui devienne consolidée dans une «habitude mentale d’évaluation». Bien que cette étude ne soit qu’un projet exploratoire de ce phénomène sans prétendre être une recherche définitive, elle s’appuie sur des exemples tirés du Manitoba School Improvement Program (MSIP), une initiative canadienne visant l’amélioration des expériences et des résultats d’apprentissage dans les écoles secondaires par la mise en valeur du potentiel.

’Tis not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.
— Charles Darwin

There was a time in education when those in positions of leadership relied on intuition and gut feeling to guide them

through the unavoidable web of complex decision-making. That time, however, has passed, and we find ourselves living in an era that might best be described as “the age of accountability.” (Earl, 1998). As the accountability agenda has escalated, publicly reported high-profile data about schools have become the cornerstone of most large-scale reform efforts (Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998). In England, for example, the percentage of pupils who meet or exceed the national target are reported in national newspapers. These results are used in a variety of ways from decisions about support and resources available to schools, to helping parents make school choice decisions. All 50 states in the United States test how well their students are learning and 27 of them hold schools accountable for results, either by rating the performance of their schools or by identifying the low-performing ones (Orlofsky & Olson, 2001).

Large-scale educational reform has demanded an “accounting” from schools using evidence that is conceived of explicitly in a language of data (Fullan, 1999). Data are to be collected, analyzed, interpreted, and displayed in the service of making decisions in all areas of education ranging from funding to learning. In this article, we will argue that mandated evaluation requirements can serve as the impetus for accountability to become synonymous with organizational improvement. We offer evidence of how the processes and practices surrounding the use of data for wise decision-making find intrinsically derived sustainability. Though exploratory in intent and not designed to be definitive, illustrations are provided from Canada’s Manitoba School Improvement Program Inc., an initiative designed to improve the learning experiences and outcomes of secondary school students through capacity building.

WHAT DO WE KNOW? AND HOW DO WE KNOW IT?

In exploring the requirement of using data for decision-making, we find potential, though implicit, answers to two definitive questions: What do we know? and How do we know it? Readers familiar with the American Educational Research Association (AERA) will recognize these two elements of inquiry as the defining theme for the organization’s 2001 annual meeting (see Purcell-Gates & Snow, 2000). The difficulty in answering these questions, however, derives not only from the absence of any specific content (i.e., what and how do we know about x), but also from the fact that the two questions are intimately bound to one another. That is, what we know very much depends on how we come to know it — our epistemologies and

methodologies are closely intertwined. We are referring here to the nature of knowledge and its acquisition-driven processes that define the contours of the particular institutions within which we find membership and around which we subsequently construct our professional identities.

Institutional Processes and Organizational Improvement

Science is an example of one such institution and, as Olson and Katz (2001) explain, not every belief held by a scientist is taken to be knowledge. Beliefs must follow long and complex social processes embedded in formally constituted institutions before they achieve the status of “the known.” These social processes include not only private and collective thought, but also the production of public artifacts that are subjected to the rituals of publication, replication, adoption, citation, and so on. We see, then, that the “what” and “how” of knowing are inseparable. In a broader epistemological sense, Agnew and Pyke (1994) suggest using a verb rather than a noun to describe the drive to inquiry — use the term “sciencing” rather than “science” to underscore the significance of the process.

Just as “process” is central in the scientific institution, so too is it central in the institution that is the focus of this article — schooling. This point is well captured in the preceding allusion to the currency involved in the procedural practice of using data to make decisions in the name of accountability. But this in itself is not enough. The necessary process must be defined in a way that is commensurate with accountability for the purpose of organizational learning and improvement, rather than for the satisfaction of externally driven accounting demands. It is the latter definition, however, that is the most visible and public, and the one typically conceived of in popular notions of accountability. That said, it is important to realize that there is a very real benefit associated with these ever expanding external mandates that define the contours of the terrain that make up the age of accountability. Such value is best defined and understood through the psychological lens of motivation.

MOTIVATION

Deci and Ryan (1985, 1987) have proposed a fundamental distinction between actions that are self-determined and those that are controlled. The former include chosen behaviours that are engaged in for intrinsic reasons. The latter behaviours are engaged in because of an

external pressure to conform to a set standard or to meet a particular expectation. The authors point out that there is a danger when motivational cues are external, namely, when the extrinsic reinforcer is discontinued, the desired behaviour is typically extinguished. Such overt controls do, however, encourage engagement where it would otherwise be absent. The challenge is to follow this engagement with opportunities to develop intrinsic reasons in order to maintain the behaviour in the absence of the external reinforcer. External mandates, like required program evaluations, which encourage the controlled actions associated with the collection and reporting of school and district data, offer the potential benefit of creating conditions in which the importance of data for decision-making can become understood. That said, as long as accounting to surveillance demands remains the procedural end, this worthwhile behaviour will always be at the mercy of its extrinsic benefactor. It is only when accountability becomes synonymous with organizational improvement that the processes and practices surrounding the use of data for decision-making will find intrinsically derived sustainability.

AN EVALUATION HABIT OF MIND

The contexts within which the practices of schooling take place are very complex and the kinds of challenges that school leaders find themselves faced with might best be described as ill-structured. Such problems demand more than the single, right answer. They demand judgments that are reflective (King & Kitchener, 1994), judgments that respect that knowledge must be understood in relationship to context and evidence. It is the interpretations of evidence that "can be synthesized into epistemologically justifiable conjectures about the nature of the problem under consideration" (King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 70). It is in the understanding of the nature of evidence, from its definition and collection to its interpretation and presentation, that we identify the necessity of using data for decision-making (Cousins & Earl, 1995; Lee, 1999; Owen, 1999; Patton, 1997). We believe the term "evaluation habit of mind" is a particularly appropriate metaphor to describe this process-oriented mode of thought that organizational leaders must develop in the service of making wise decisions. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (Allen, 1991) defines a habit as follows: "settled or tendency of practice; practice that is hard to give up; mental constitution." This notion effectively delineates what we see as an organizational learning goal, through the image of a developed culture or a "way of being." That said, an evaluation habit of mind for organizational improvement need not result

in insulation, but, as we will see, can also better position leaders to meet future externally derived requirements.

The Organization as a Dynamic System

The attainment and the implementation of an evaluation habit of mind conceptualized with an eye toward organizational improvement begins to approximate the characteristics of a dynamic system. That is, elaborate structures are conceivable outcomes of simple feedback processes operating over time. This self-organization arises from the four central features common to all dynamic systems that Keating (1996) describes: (a) the process must iterate routinely; (b) the process must have a feedback loop; (c) the context includes internal constraints that shaped the system; and (d) the context sets the external constraints that shape the actual self-organization that takes place. In practice, an evaluation habit of mind is an iterative and context-dependent process that allows a system to self-organize and thus advance and improve. And this, of course, defines our systemic goal.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE MANITOBA SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

The Manitoba School Improvement Program (MSIP), originally a foundation-supported school-level improvement initiative, provides one illustration of the notion of an evaluation habit of mind. MSIP is a non-profit, non-governmental, independent school improvement organization. In addition to receiving multi-year grants, MSIP schools receive professional and technical support from the program for skill building, including support for program evaluation. MSIP has always believed that thoughtful reflection based on data helps build a school's capacity to sustain improvement. As part of their involvement in MSIP, schools must agree to produce annual evaluation reports (Lee, 1999).

The results of an overall program evaluation (see <<http://www.gordonfn.org>> for the full report) suggest that successful MSIP schools derive benefit from the evaluation process. According to Fullan, Lee, and Kilcher, "engaging in ongoing inquiry and reflection appears to be one of the key factors separating schools with deep impact from those whose project impact is less significant" (1995, p. 27). Successful schools regard evaluation as an invaluable tool for school planning. The more school staff internalize the inquiry approach, the more confident they become in using data.

Defining MSIP Factors

Early in the project, MSIP believed that meaningful change must originate from within. At the outset of the project, an evaluation consultant was hired to work directly with the MSIP schools. The consultant, employing a participatory approach, was a natural fit with MSIP's philosophy of having schools take ownership of their school improvement initiatives and of evaluating their success. She subscribed to an evaluation-utilization strategy, believing that if educators saw the value in evaluation, they would use the results. In turn, they would be more likely to see the value if they had a stake in the process (Lee, 1999). She noted that her approach was consistent with the Cousins and Earl (1995) definition of participatory evaluation as "applied social research that involves trained evaluation personnel (or research) specialists and practice-based decision makers working in partnership" (p. 399). MSIP encouraged teachers to take on roles of "school-based coordinators" and "troubleshooters," encouraging and creating the avenues for increased staff participation. In addition, administrators were important as advocates and facilitators in the overall school improvement process.

The evaluation consultant made routine school visits and met with the planning teams to assist with the application and planning process, to develop an evaluation plan, to provide advice on implementation, and to serve as a "critical friend" challenging and clarifying proposed directions (Earl & Lee, 1998). Critical friends offer both support and critique in an honest appraisal (MacBeath, 1998). As Costa and Kallick (1995) describe it, a critical friend is "a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work, as a friend" (p.154).

MSIP also offered evaluation workshops where teachers, coordinators, administrators, parents, and later students could come together as a network of schools learning how to collect, analyze, and interpret data. MSIP networking activities can be divided into five sections: connections among schools/divisions, professional development, venues for sharing of school improvement initiatives, current research, and models and processes (MSIP, 2000). According to Lieberman and Grolnick (1996), educational networks are becoming increasingly important as alternative forms of teacher and school development. These networks appear to be a way of engaging school-based educators in better directing their own learning; allowing them to sidestep the limitations of institutional roles, hierarchies, and

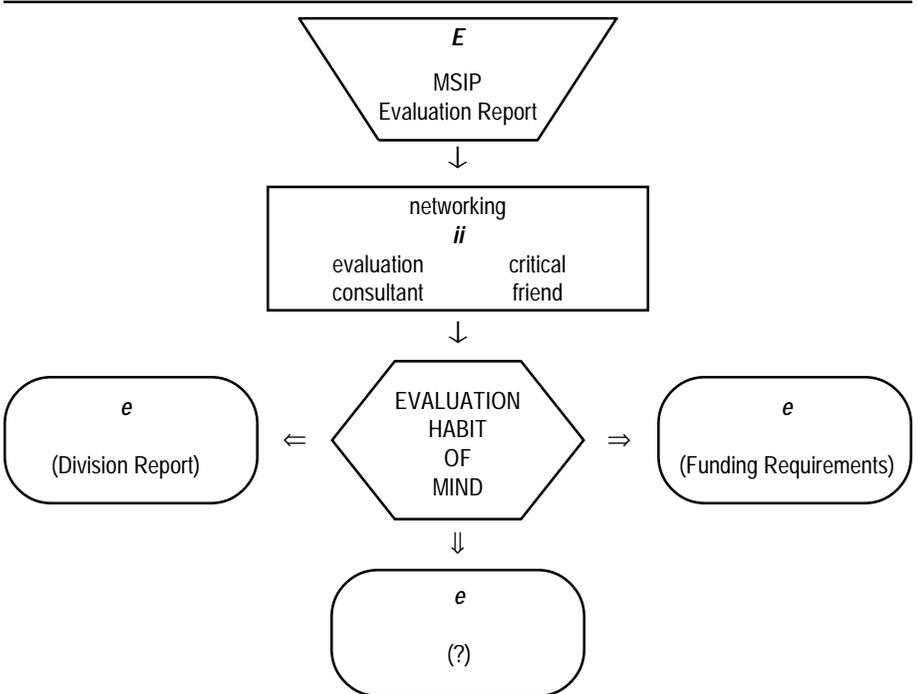
geographic locations, and encouraging them to work with many different kinds of people.

Having sketched out the specifics of the MSIP initiative, we are in a position to see the way in which the project's mandated evaluation requirement places schools and their leaders in a position in which the importance of data for decision-making can become understood. As such, the requirement to produce an annual report approximates an extrinsic motivational cue designed to bring about this end. The challenge becomes one of sustaining this inquiry-minded behaviour once the external evaluation requirement is removed. In the remainder of this article, we provide a first glance at what this developed habit of mind might look like in practice.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 portrays in temporal sequence the major components for conceptualizing the development of an evaluation habit of mind, and later guides the presentation of the data.

Figure 1
Developing an Evaluation Habit of Mind



At the top of the framework, “E” represents the extrinsic motivating cue — in this case the required MSIP evaluation report — that places schools and their leaders in a position in which the importance of data for decision-making can become understood. Thereafter, a gradual process, which we term “ii” (incremental internalization), fosters the evaluation capacity building effort. In the case of MSIP this involves the previously described intentional interventions such as “networking,” the role of “critical friend,” and the availability of an “evaluation consultant.” The ultimate consolidation of this process is what we have discussed as an “evaluation habit of mind,” a process-oriented mode of thought or capacity to be used in the service of making wise decisions. Finally, “e” represents the potential for a developed evaluation habit of mind to better position schools and their leaders to meet future externally derived requirements. As we will see, such requirements might include other school improvement funding applications or a mandated divisional report.

METHODOLOGY

The data that will be reported here were collected as part of annual interviews with principals conducted in June/July of 2000 for the purposes of the ongoing program evaluation. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule that, although not a primary focus, offered participants the opportunity to talk about data utilization in their schools. A total of 22 MSIP principals participated in the study. The interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes in duration and were audiotaped with the respondents’ permission. Following the interviews, the tapes were transcribed. Using Folio Views 4.2 information management software, the transcripts were analyzed by an approach consisting of unitizing and categorizing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This resulted in the emergence of themes. The final step was to group and title the themes, and these are used in the presentation of findings that follow.

For the purposes of this study, only interviews with principals from schools designated as “alumni” were included for analysis ($n = 6$). By definition an alumni school has outlived its MSIP funding years but is sustaining its improvement project in the absence of direct resource support. Some alumni schools are receiving minimal sustainability grants or their districts have entered into arrangements with MSIP in a cost-sharing initiative. Regardless, once a school has outlived its project funding the external requirement to

produce an annual evaluation report is removed. From a motivational standpoint this is important because if it appears, the practice of using data for school improvement purposes has found sustainability that is intrinsic to the organization.

FINDINGS

When they were funded by MSIP, the six schools were required to set school-based goals that would form the basis for the annual evaluation report. The specific nature of the goals was left to school staff to determine independent of the external funder. The six projects were quite different in their focus and content. Some were broad-based efforts intended to affect whole school change, while others were smaller, more locally focused projects. For example, initiatives ranged from integration of technology into the curriculum and instituting a structural schedule change to implementing peer mediation programs and creating student leadership opportunities.

The study's findings, discussed in detail below, can be summarized as follows:

- *Initial reactions to the evaluation requirement:* The MSIP evaluation requirement was initially perceived as burdensome.
- *An evaluation habit of mind:* Though no longer funded, many alumni schools sustained the program's evaluation legacy. This is evidenced through data-driven goal-related inquiry, systematic reflection and planning, and the presence of an evaluation-minded culture.
- *Meeting other external requirements:* The MSIP evaluation structure was replicated for an additional external demand.

Initial Reactions to the Evaluation Requirement

Although the annual report was seen as burdensome, it was held out as a beneficial activity through which to re-evaluate past practices and define future direction:

Initially ... it was a pain in the butt and we were always scrambling to get this done. But when I look at where we are now it really is a helpful process because I think it

forces us to do the reflection. It forces us to reflect on our outcomes, did we meet them? If not, what got in our way?

It's a real pressure, it can be crazy and you've got this damned thing to do. That's what it becomes — that damned thing — when in fact it really is a good opportunity to review what's happened during the year...

It's a pain in the ass but it does polish your writing skills and gives your computer a real work-out. But what it did, though, for us, it put us into a place where we really needed to reflect and focus.

An Evaluation Habit of Mind

Data-driven goal-related inquiry

The interviews revealed an appeal to the value of data in providing schools with answers to goal-related questions. One principal noted the use of a parent questionnaire to inquire into community perceptions of the school:

[We designed] a parent questionnaire which we mailed out and sent to the community to actually get feedback from the community to find out whether the news really was as bad as the rumours were. So, several things happened there. Number one was that we had a 67% return rate on the questionnaire. The community was infinitely involved in their children's lives at school. That was one of the tenets of our project — to get the community involved in the school.

Another principal referenced the use of dropout statistics in order to begin a discussion with staff around student retention and attrition:

We are now keeping stats of the number of students who were in the classes at the beginning of the semester, the number of students who dropped out during the semester and the final ones who were successful in completing the credit. We are collecting data on it, and we are sharing it with staff on a regular basis. A lot of teachers never thought of this at all. They have no idea that 33% of the students are unsuccessful, more if you consider the drop-outs. In some classes over 50% of these kids

either dropped out or didn't pass the course. The teachers are just blown away. I tell the teachers, "What I don't want you to do is take this personally." Yeah, there might be some individual things you can do. But we need to ask the question, why is this happening? It's not necessarily you, the person, it might be the department. What kinds of policies are in place? Are you really turning kids off with some of this stuff? Now, we have also implemented a "reason for withdrawal" form. Students have to fill this out when they withdraw from the class, so we have some more data. We are building a database and we certainly can't use only this year's data. If a teacher suddenly for 5 semesters in a row has many other classes with a 50% dropout or failure rate when the end result came in, I'd have to ask some questions.

Finally, data were used to drive a process of inquiry into school safety:

We use data in our school extensively as part of our on-going planning activities. We've been able to pick out key elements about our goals, for example school safety. The data came back in tremendous support that this school is a safe place. It's reinforced our notions and directed us this year. We've had to pay minor attention to school safety but have kept the issue at the forefront. Our goal is to continue to analyze data and tie it to our school plan for this year which is quite exhaustive.

Systematic reflection and planning

Although no longer required, the MSIP model of an annual evaluation report was maintained by the schools as a way of engaging in systematic reflection and planning activities. As several principals stated:

[We use annual reports] for improving and planning our next year and making our goals and improving for next year. We use data for input into the school plan. We use it to reinforce what we're doing and to motivate us to keep going. Data is feedback that allows us to reflect on what we've done.

[Developing a school plan and putting together an annual report is] helpful in terms of looking at areas that

we thought were really important and were committed to, and then going back and seeing just how important they were and how much effort we really put into it or didn't put into it because it turned out it wasn't so important after all or because of whatever circumstances we need to look at. It's just honest. It's the case that in education most people are relatively articulate and we can talk a really good game and we can write a really good game. That report is really what forces you to say, "We're not so hot. We didn't do this."

If we said we were going to do *x* and in our report we demonstrated that we did, then the next automatic on the goal sheet was "Where do we go from here then?" So the staff that I was involved with... I would solicit first of all from them what they believed their strand had accomplished for the year and I would collate all of that and then I would write the report. Then I would give it all back to all of them again and they would read it again and they would feed back to me on whether what I said was okay or not. And then the second piece of that was obviously "Where do we go from here?" So, that was a staff goal that was collaborative, and reflection and discussion were just an integral part of the way we operated at the school.

One principal explicitly noted an appeal to student surveys in revisiting the school's goals as part of the planning process:

We were just looking at the student surveys from last June; I've looked a bit at them. I know that my vice-principal ... has looked at the surveys and we put them into our yearly report. Independently of the MSIP project we come up with a school plan, so each department has to come up with their plan. In May of this year they had to reflect and give us an update on what they had accomplished and what they hadn't accomplished and what were some of the barriers. It has been helpful as we go through our planning cycle.

Evaluation-minded culture

A developed habit of mind was reflected in principals' comments as they spoke of evaluation as an integral part of the school culture.

One administrator explained a continued reliance on MSIP staff for technical support in the process of inquiry:

[Though we're not required to be involved with them anymore], MSIP staff have done evaluations for us, where they created the instrument and we've surveyed students and staff and parents. And they have done the analysis and the interpretation and then presented that to us and engaged with the staff in a dialogue around what this information means.

Finally, several of the principals made reference to the systematic practice of using data for decision-making as an ongoing process, thus describing an evaluation-minded culture:

Even though we don't have to do a report or a proposal or whatever, it's part of what happens here. We have intra-study groups around a particular issue or around ... Like for example we set up a study group around assessment practices, alternative assessment practices. That group of four or five people spent the year with some release time examining alternative assessment and doing some research, doing some reading, reporting back to the staff, trying to get information from them, and then they ended up hosting an in-service where they incorporate students into that — asking students their opinions in terms of assessment and evaluation, and having the students talk with their staff.

We've gotten better at [producing an annual report] over the years in terms of making it more of an ongoing process throughout the years instead of waiting till the end... We began to really incorporate it into the year. We would do reflective checks at staff meetings throughout the year or do focus groups throughout the year around where things are going and how they need to change and that kind of stuff. So, [the annual report] ended up being an exercise that became really reflective and then at the other level became futuristic.

We've used data throughout the years to derive the next year's initiatives. Data have become significant as a vehicle to help plan a sense of direction. We would talk about "data to action." Ongoing inquiry and reflection

are now part of the culture. Today at a staff gathering they did a reflective piece on the year in terms of different professional development. They did a survey, an hour-long survey, and they gave that in advance. That piece is part of what drives next year.

Meeting Other External Requirements

Finally, a developed evaluation habit of mind appeared to better position schools and their leaders to meet future externally derived requirements. Such requirements included other school improvement funding applications and a mandated divisional report:

We have to secure outside funding to make some of our projects work. Because in order to try new things, and this is what MSIP has taught us I think, is in order to try something new, you have to — it's not enough just to give support. There's got to be the pressure that comes from the outside. So you may have outside consultants, you certainly have outside expectations, and you need to have evaluations that are focused on proving that you're doing what you said you were going to do. Now if somebody provides financial support to us or in kind support, and expects something back, that's really important. Because our staff then knows that something is expected. Nobody gets lethargic about where they're going with somebody else's money. MSIP created the awareness that...having an evaluation makes a lot of sense. I've become a firm believer in having a thorough evaluation process before you start the project. So you teach to the test through the whole thing.

For our division office school improvement plan, we have continued with the MSIP [participatory] structure of having all community partners feed into the school plan, the students, the teachers, and community representatives. We find it works. Everybody has had a chance to have a say about what they think we could improve.

As we pointed out earlier, in the beginning stages of MSIP, the mandated evaluation requirement was perceived as a chore by most schools. School staff held the attitude that the evaluation was a "numbers game" that had little relevance to the schools themselves and

served only to satisfy the external funder. We have seen, however, that over time schools that were no longer required to produce evaluation reports became proficient at, and saw the value in, collecting, thinking about, interpreting, and using data within their particular contexts. The shift was from the external motivating force of a required evaluation report to an incrementally internalized habit of mind. In this way, the school as an organization takes on the appearance of a dynamic system. Simple feedback processes, operating over time, consolidate into a capacity for continuous improvement.

CONCLUSION

The evaluation process and the data derived from it have been posited as powerful mechanisms for educational change (Cousins & Earl, 1995). In this article, we have proposed that engaging in guided evaluation activities stimulates and activates what we call an "evaluation habit of mind." This self-sustaining mode of thought is a fundamental shift in thinking about the kind of information that has value and about connecting this information to planning and to action. The "alumni" schools in MSIP offered a ready-made natural experiment in which to illuminate the practical face of our theory. The exploratory conceptual framework and data interpretation that guided the analysis represent a reasonable explication of an outcome, namely a developed evaluation habit of mind. It is not yet clear, however, as to how the process of incremental internalization evolves and contributes to this end. In a follow-up study with another population, we are pursuing one promising direction by mapping the trajectory of the development of an evaluation habit of mind using the central tenets of cognitive learning theory.

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