

NOTES ON THE AMERICAN FASCINATION WITH THE ENGLISH TRADITION OF SCHOOL INSPECTION

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SUMMARY:

"Notes" briefly explores the dynamics of the American school reform movement for an explanation of the current American interest in English school inspection. The main explanation suggested is that there is a clear and growing awareness of the difficulties of knowing schools through standardized testing. Knowledge from testing is a poor resource for schemes of school accountability and for supporting the work of teachers.

Reflecting American interest, the Study of School inspection was carried out in 1992 to discover what the underlying assumptions are in how traditional English inspection knows and judges schools. The Study is based on watching LEA and HM inspectors at work over a nine-month period. The book resulting from the Study, *Reaching for a Better Standard, Discovering Fresh Ways to Know and Judge American Schools*, introduces English inspection to the reader in some detail and then considers the ramifications of several of its major ideas for American assessment and reform.

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Earlham College, BA, 1961
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THE IMPORTANCE OF MAY 1992

In 1992 several important events in the history of school reform occurred in both Britain and the United States. In February Parliament passed the Education (Schools) Act 1992 mandating what was certainly the most major reform of British inspection since 1902. The first white paper *Choice And Diversity: A Framework For Schools* by the re-elected Conservative Government's Secretary, John Patten, made clear that the Government was resolved to complete the reform of British education begun by the Education Reform Act of 1988. The British reform is among the most comprehensive attempts in history to overhaul the schools of a democratic nation. The white paper laid out what was called the final building

block of the reform, a historic centralizing of power to the national Department.

Meanwhile in America the English reform was often cited in the continuing debate about education reform. The beginning of the current era of American reform is usually traced to 1983, when a national commission issued a report entitled, *Nation At Risk*. Stirring unusual attention that stimulated intense nation-wide efforts to reform schools, that report stated that the nation's schools were worse than they would have been if America's enemies had built them with the intent of doing the country critical harm. By 1992 the debate about education was beginning to swirl around such issues as the value of national standards, a national curriculum, and national testing. Presidential candidates raised education as an issue somewhat more often than usual. It is important to note that the United States constitution specifically places the responsibility for education on the states, not the federal government. That is why in 1990 President Bush met with the state governors to set six national educational goals.

In May 1992 two small incidents occurred in the history of British-American exchange. (1.) David Green, then an HMI, went to Albany, New York to work with the New York State

Department of Education as a consultant. (2.) I came to England for nine months to study the English Tradition of School Inspection.

While these incidents are insignificant when held against the scope of the macro events taking place at the time, they are interesting indices of the American interest in English inspection. Strongly related to the issues and dynamics of American reform, that interest has steadily grown since 1992.

THE ROOTS OF AMERICAN INTEREST IN INSPECTION

The two small incidents of the British-American exchange in May 1992 did not drop out of thin air. Although I have not learned why the Boston Public Library houses a collection of early English inspection documents, that might point to the first demonstrable American interest in English inspection. The current interest is probably rooted in the 1970's, when Lillian Weber and her associates in New York City, while working to improve elementary education and teacher support, became interested in English primary schools. Part of their interest was in HMI.

In the late 1980s New York City's Central Park East Secondary School won national acclaim for exemplifying the

goal of national reform – creating a school that was successful in improving how students think. Weber's interest in HMI was part of the heritage that Central Park East and the associated Center for Collaborative Education considered while they wrestled with questions about how to make assessment consistent with the schools' purpose and design.

In October 1988 a group of English educators visited a number of American schools, primarily in New York City. Two years later a reciprocal group of American teachers and school administrators visited English schools. This exchange, first proposed in an agreement between the Secretaries of Education of the two countries, was carried out under the auspices of HMI and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. David Green, then an HMI, coordinated the enterprise. As a result of their participation in these visits, several key New York educators became interested in inspection (Learmonth 1993).

This interest became part of New York's comprehensive reform effort, *A New Compact for Learning*. In the wide range of American state departments of education, New York is one of the largest and most important. Green was attached to the department to set up a new process for assessing schools.

The resulting School Quality Review has been based on ideas from traditional English inspection. It has now been piloted in over fifty schools throughout the state (Olson, 1994).

Concurrent with these projects, interest in the ideas of inspection has been growing fast at many levels. New York has decided to expand the School Quality Review. Other states and school districts across the United States have become interested in the idea. Policy makers, the business community and scholars have been intrigued.

My intrigue with inspection began in the 1970s during my work for urban school reform in Chicago, Illinois. Raising substantive questions about the difficulties we saw in traditional educational assessment practices, my colleagues and I piloted alternative approaches (Hamilton, 1977).

Reliance on testing student performance to assess schools and reform programs appeared badly flawed. Standardized tests were limited. Test score information provided little wisdom or guidance either to teachers about how to teach better or to policy makers about what policies were effective in supporting school improvement.

These issues were not widely discussed until the considerable acceleration in the American reform efforts in

the late 1980s. That interest led to the two small incidents in American-British exchange in May 1992.

THE STUDY OF SCHOOL INSPECTION

The American interest in inspection led to grant support from IBM, The Pew Charitable Trusts, The Carnegie Corporation, the Lilly Endowment, the Joyce Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation to conduct the Study. A group of distinguished American education scholars became Study advisors. The Study is associated with the Education Department at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island and The Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation and Educational Policy at Boston College.

The purpose of the Study has been first to develop an in-depth understanding of the practice of inspection and then to consider whether the ideas embodied in inspection are relevant to American assessment practice.

To garner the requisite understanding of the practice of inspection, I spent most of my time in England shadowing 39 LEA and HM inspectors at work. During the course of the Study, I visited 14 elementary schools and 5 high schools, spending two days to a week at seven schools and two or more weeks at two others.

The purpose of the Study required me to focus on the *methods* of inspection. The lack of written descriptions of inspection methods, the importance of the sets of complex relationships that inspectors build, and the fast change that was underway in England – both in inspection and the nations' schools – all supported the necessity of my trying to watch inspectors and figure out what they do from an American point of view. The Study was **not** intended to be a systematic evaluation of inspection.

When my task was explained to English teachers or heads, the most common reaction was surprise that an American was interested in inspection at all, particularly at the time of its apparent demise. Several asked if I was an archeologist.

My work in English schools turned out to be a remarkable experience. Even though the new inspection Framework was published and inspectors had begun to train for the new *OFSTED* inspections, the inspections I witnessed were carried out under traditional procedures and methods. Because inspection evolved before the ideas of evaluation, modern social science research, or policy research were prevalent, it was clearly built on a different set of assumptions about how to know schools – assumptions that seemed to be much

closer to how teachers think about quality and assessment than the assumptions that underlie the American tradition of testing.

The Study afforded me unusual entry into English schools, where I had the opportunity to talk with many teachers and administrators and watch them at work. Having spent my entire professional life in school reform, I was amazed to see that any reform strategy, especially one pushed down by a central Government, could change what was happening in actual schools. While eventually questioning the value of what was happening, I had no question that something was happening. I was struck by how teachers struggled to do their duty as public employees and implement what was required of them. Many believed the practices sanctioned by the reform were detrimental to good teaching and sought ways to both teach well and "deliver the curriculum."

WHY AMERICANS ARE INTRIGUED

My surprise at the impact of British reform on local schools was closely tied to how American reform works. American schools and teachers seem much more impervious to change, particularly centralized regulated change.

While the current wave of American reform has historical roots in previous eras, such as the 1970's, the current dynamic is different. The alternative school movement of the 1970's was championed by a scattering of school-based educators, who believed school change must be based at the school and who built new schools to show that there was a better way to do it. The force of the current reform, stemming from the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report, comes from major support from the political and business communities. For example, President Clinton's reputation as a good state Governor is based in part on his leadership in school reform in Arkansas. He was a member of the group of "education governors." There were no "education governors" before 1983.

A major stream of American reform will seem familiar to English educationists. Following the release of the 1983 report, many state legislatures passed laws to regulate the improvement of the quality of education, although none went so far as to establish a full curriculum. In two years it was clear that regulations were not working.

In the late 1980's the impetus to reform schools changed. A rather remarkable national consensus that American schools must provide a "more thoughtful and intellectually ambitious

instruction" changed the focus from regulations to the classroom. A number of national reform efforts, including Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools at Brown University, began working with local schools and advocating "bottom-up" "school-based" change.

While improvement in learning is accepted as the desired outcome, many continue to believe that national standards, testing and regulated accountability are necessary to promote this change in schools. One could see the 1992 debate simply as being between those who believed in the importance of national goals and those who believed such an approach would encumber the crucial process of reforming classroom teaching and learning (Sizer, 1992).

The importance of accountability was not in dispute. However, as the reform progressed, there was heightened interest in accountability because of the increased need to evaluate reform programs "to learn what really works." Pressure increased on the extant tradition of knowing and judging schools that relied heavily on standardized testing, a tradition originally begun in the 1920's to aid in the selection of students for college admission. The new pressures revealed difficulties in using testing to judge whether schools are good or not. Could testing

methodologies bear the weight of providing the prime information for judging school quality required by the reform?

We had no inspection tradition to draw upon. The notion that an experienced practitioner could judge the quality of what actually happened in a school in a manner that would support a national accountability scheme was utterly foreign. Observations of schools were considered anecdotal information. Accountability schemes had to be based on "real" measures of student performance. It soon became clear that testing was not up to the new task of judging school quality or the quality of school reform.

To exacerbate the problem, testing and the testing industry were under major critical attack – by groups ranging from minority parents arguing that standardized tests discriminated against their children, to scholars noting their misuse in practice, their conceptual inadequacies and their destructive side-effect on teachers, students and schools (Madaus, 1992). Tests were fading in the public eye as a legitimate source of information about schools. In 1992 a number of important groups, including the testing industry, began developing new tests to handle the job more adequately.

It is important to understand that, as an established American tradition in education, testing student-performance had become much more than a set of techniques for testing. It had become a tradition of ideas and practice as well. The problem of using this tradition for judging schools lay more with these ideas and practice than with the narrow testing techniques themselves.

The ideas behind testing practice were not discrete, but have been woven into a philosophy of whole cloth. For example, testing practice quickly translates observations of student-performance into numbers. The faster the conversion, the more cost-efficient the process is considered to be. Several assumptions contribute to the value placed on this conversion. These derive from the American fascination with numbers that goes back to the era of the American revolution, the history of psychometrics in education, and the self-interest of the testing industry. Testing is based on a belief that dramatic, revealing figures are necessary to spur legislation; that numbers are more objective than words; that the media requires hard, simple facts; that good policy formulation requires reports built from statistical analysis and that policy makers prefer numbers. The strongly held beliefs about the value

of this approach mask its drawbacks: that this practice of converting observations to numbers does not provide a rich enough view of what goes on in schools, that it does not provide much guidance for deciding a course of action to spur higher quality classroom learning.

The critiques of the tradition that emerged at this time included:

Using student-performance to judge school performance puts too much weight on students, resulting in student-as-product metaphors that reduce learning and teaching to input variables. It makes it possible for the adults in the school to dodge full responsibility for what they do ("It's not what we do that matters, but what the kids do. Our best strategy is to get the best kids.")

Traditional testing results provide little help to teachers or staff, who know that the mark of solid learning is not only passing today's test, but performing well over time and who are working to find better ways to make that happen. Student-performance scores do not contribute to, and many would say they detract from, the efforts of teachers and staff to improve their productivity. The emphasis on test

results narrows the sights of teachers and school staff to achieving the short-term learning goals that will be tested and distracts them from the goals of teaching long-term skills and habits that will make a difference in adult citizenship. Further, the assessment emphasis on aggregate scores distracts teachers' attention from the crux of good teaching – i.e., engaging the particular mind of each child.

Testing paradigms often deflect, rather than support, serious efforts to reform schools. They encourage reform to be viewed as discrete packages whose significant effects can actually be measured through testing student-performance. Change in schooling practice is more complex than that, involving many, usually non-linear, interactions among many aspects of a school. Further, testing paradigms can warp the standard-setting process. The testing tradition supports setting standards that are separate from the practice of teaching. When standards are seen first as tools of accountability, they direct attention away from the implicit standards that make the difference – those that are built into each school, into each teacher's work, into each class.

Finally, testing student performance supports public reporting that does not engage the public in meaningful discourse about the nature of good schooling, the issues in good schooling or good strategies for improving schooling. The testing tradition's reliance on statistical analysis, which falls in the realm of technical experts, pushes people away from the evidence and prevents them from engaging in the argument.

Common sense, particular experience and personal values are devalued. Without access to what is behind the judgments or the recommendations for change, the public discussion is more likely to bounce from outrage to outrage or to rally around programs with catch-phrase slogans: "alternative schools," "basic education," "choice," "site-based management," "restructuring."

While Americans do not completely agree about the limitations of testing, there is agreement that we should carefully consider other assessment strategies for making judgments about school performance.

The idea that there might be other ways to know and judge schools became attractive. New York State's interest in School Quality Review comes in part from the state's slogan "top-down support for bottom-up reform." To make that idea

manifest requires changes in strategies for assessing schools.

Those who knew about inspection saw it as a different tradition of school assessment that had a rich history. The idea of sending an experienced person to observe a school appeared to be responsive to some of the concerns.

INSPECTION IDEAS DO INTRIGUE AMERICANS

Through the School Inspection Study I found traditional inspection a remarkably fresh way to view school assessment.

Over its 150-year history, inspection has evolved a methodology that portrays and judges the quality of what actually happens in schools. Inspectors, who are experienced teachers, actually visit schools, directly observe classes and make judgements about the quality of the teaching and learning based on the evidence they collect at the school. Through a team moderation process, the judgements of individual inspectors are discussed and a corporate judgement is agreed upon by the inspection team. The results are reported back both to school people and policy makers. Inspection has managed to keep the issues of

quality, assessment and support of schools directly tied to schools and to provide consistent information both to policy makers and school practitioners.

Inspection provides American educators with a template for a different exploration of how assessment can become more useful to school practitioners and policy makers, who are trying to improve teaching and learning in the schools. Inspection is neither perfect enough nor American enough for simple adoption by American education. Inspection has been built upon a number of assumptions and ideas about schools that challenge American assumptions, raising the possibility that new inventions are possible. (Wilson, forthcoming.)

Given the dynamics of inspection that I found, these ideas seem to me to be the most relevant to Americans:

- the focus on actual teaching and learning,
- the high value on practitioner knowledge,
- the use of practitioner judgement in assessing schools,

- the tension between monitoring and supporting schools.

At this point it is too early to tell the significance of the American fascination with inspection. Inspection could be one fad among a legion of reform fads. The ideas of inspection could stimulate a vital rethinking of some of the ideas that shape how we think about and carry out school reform. If so, it is possible the ideas of traditional English school inspection would make a vital contribution to modern democratic education.

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