

"...MUCH REMAINING AS YET UNEXPLAINED..."

--CHARLES DARWIN, *ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES*

GRADING EDUCATION: GETTING ACCOUNTABILITY RIGHT.

A CATALPA REVIEW

Thomas A. Wilson, Ed.D.

December, 2009

In the heady and uncertain days of Fall 2008, when speculation about what exciting changes in educational policy might be possible if Obama were elected President, Richard Rothstein, Rebecca Jacobsen and Tamara Wilder published *Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right* (Teachers College Press and Economic Policy Institute, 2008). They hoped their thorough and far reaching critique of the current American practices of school accountability, coupled with a dramatic proposal for change, would contribute to a time when the nation was receptive to change. They would build upon the frame of Rothstein's thoughtful work on testing and accountability over the past 10 years. The goal is to make school accountability more accountable as an effective policy tool to improve the quality of the education of American students.

Grading makes an important contribution to the national discussion about school accountability. Its focused analyses of the current concepts and practices that make up American school accountability are brilliant. These include the sections on "outcome goals," "perverse accountability" and "accountability by the numbers." An important construct holds these detailed and persuasive analyses together: The inappropriate use of precise numbers to measure imprecise phenomena leads to bad science. For an agency whose central function is to provide good service from practicing professionals, it can lead to bad policy. As Rothstein points out, it has led education agencies to misuse test scores for accountability purposes. His substantive refutation of the maxim, "If you can't measure something precisely, then it is not worth measuring," clears away a

significant amount of brush that has overtaken current American education accountability.

Unfortunately, the same quality of analysis and persuasive writing does not permeate the sections proposing what changes are necessary if accountability is to become a useful tool for improving American educational practice. For example, *Grading* does not build its proposal to extend after-school programs upon a solid analysis of the value and impact of these programs. There is not enough here to overcome the skepticism that resulted from the failures of the War-on-Poverty's "compensatory education" initiatives. The argument that testing should be extended to other subjects overlooks the good arguments that have been offered for why that is NOT a wise strategy.

Given my advocacy of the school visit as a way to fix the flaws in American school accountability, you can imagine my excitement when I realized that *Grading* was going to recommend using the visit in a state-based, nation-wide system to balance the imbalances that result from our overreliance on test scores to measure school performance. My initial excitement soon faded.

The book presents a weak rationale for why school visits would work. It does not build this rationale from the existing knowledge of how the visit works as a legitimate research methodology or from an argument about how and why the visit has proved effective as a way of collecting data about the quality of school practice.

The fact that England and other countries use some form of the visit is not compelling by itself. The term school visit, particularly when referring to international usage, includes a wide array of purposes, practices and successes. Cultural and political differences among nations often excite new possibilities for the international researcher, but unless the researcher takes unusual care when dealing with these differences, his naïve, initial perceptions may miss or confuse the evidence rather than clarify it. The English are expert at briefing Americans about the superiority of what they do, while ignoring the problems and the reality of what actually happens.

More important is that *Grading* ignores a decent array of research in the United States about how professional peer visits work in education and

what value they have. Some of this research is based on the accreditation visit (which they did consider), some of it is based on professional visits that are used in accrediting other professions, (e.g. medicine, police departments), and some of it based on newer forms of the school visit that have been designed, implemented in practice and tested over the last ten years.

The example I know best is the one I have worked on for the last 12 years. The SALT school visit represents the most wide-ranging application of a new visit. While I appreciate the book's generous footnote that acknowledges my early work on English school inspection (*Reaching for a Better Standard: English School Inspection and the Dilemma of Accountability for American Public Schools*. Teachers College Press, 1996. Go to [*Reaching for a Better Standard*](#).) my design and use of a rigorous professional visit within a comprehensive state plan for school accountability is most relevant to the purposes of *Grading*. The Rhode Island Department of Education has received considerable kudos for showing unusual state leadership in the development of SALT school visit as an institutionalized system that has involved hundreds of American teachers and educators.

In the last thirteen years, RIDE has conducted 380 week-long SALT school visits, which include at least one visit to almost every public school in the state. Visit teams have written more than 1,600 conclusions to answer these three questions:

How well are students in this school learning?

How well are its teachers teaching?

How well does this school as an organization and community support good teaching and learning?

The 2,100 professionals serving on visit teams have included 1,800 Rhode Island practicing teachers and principals.

The straight forward nature and veracity of the SALT visit team findings have stirred schools to action, taken up full pages of state newspapers and amazed observers because of the knowledge and savy of practicing teachers when, presented with the right procedures - they show they can evaluate and write about what actually happens in schools with

accuracy, that makes the greatest difference in improving learning. In addition, eighty-seven percent of the teachers who served on SALT visit teams rate that 4-5 day experience as “the most powerful professional development experience they have ever had.”

The Catalpa web site presents the detailed documents that anchored that planning effort, as well as the evaluation studies that guided its implementation. Click here for a [Description of SALT Visit](#) and associated documents. Click here for a [Description of NEASC Visit study](#), *Visiting Accreditation: Strengthening the Regional Accreditation Process* (The Lab at Brown, 1999), a two-year study of the visit as practiced by the Secondary Schools Commission of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

Because the professional visit offers a much needed and useful answer to the issues facing American school accountability, I worked both from research and my experience with SALT and NEASC to develop the conceptual structure that would undergird adaptations of the approach for both state and district use. The goal of the resulting framework, [Practice-Based Inquiry](#), is to make clear what principles are necessary to ensure a high level of rigor in the inquiry of the professional peer visit. This work provides a viable framework to counter some of the usual assumptions we make about how inquiry works and what intervention strategies serve school improvement objectives, and it also provokes important shifts in how we think about research, reform and intervention.

A description and critique of this extensive work on visit strategies across the nation during these last ten years would have been a valuable contribution for *Grading*, but unfortunately the authors side-step that, and argue that they intend to provide a skeletal vision.

Its superficial proposals are not up to the standard that *Grading* sets when it critiques current practice. It does not seek penetrating examples of the ideas at work in the real world of schools. As a result, only its analyses, not its proposals, provoke new ways to think better about measurement, accountability or public policy. In this way the book fails to provide the critical conceptual support we need to create a school accountability system that has a chance to improve the learning and

teaching of our youth dramatically. While the over all excellence of the book provides a witness in its endorsement of school visits, *Grading* could have provided a thoughtful, knowledgeable and convincing argument that the school visit has great potential as a tool to strengthen American school accountability nationwide.

Make a comment. Go to [Tom's Blog](#).