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Tensions, Inspection, Research, Teaching, Learning

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between inspection and research through the eyes of a person with experience of these practices. It is an account of an individual's attempt to understand the prescriptive nature of change in education since 1988; to locate a place within that process and try to influence those factors that are changeable and minimize those that are not. Examples are drawn from the writer's experience of combining roles in the first instance as a teacher-researcher and later as an OFSTED inspector and independent researcher.

Keywords

OFSTED, National Curriculum, Language in the National Curriculum, Socio-Cultural Theory, Democratic Change, Community of Practice, Zone of Proximal Development, Assessment for Learning

1. Introduction

How can you reconcile your role as an OFSTED inspector with that of an educational researcher?

This question was raised by a teacher-researcher who attended the presentation of my first paper on assessment for learning since qualifying as an EdD (BER conference Cardiff 2000), the presentation based on an ethnographic case study undertaken in two English primary schools (1999) focused on teaching, learning and classroom assessment. During the presentation I had declared a belief in socio-cultural theory and had alluded to the potentially harmful prescriptive practices being imposed on schools by government agencies. This teacher could not see how I could maintain an objective perspective as a researcher whilst at the same time working for one of the most punitive government agencies OFSTED. OFSTED is an acronym for Office for Standards in Education in England. Schools

are graded according to how well inspectors judge whether pupils are reaching or exceeding the standards expected of them. These judgements are based on personal observations by inspectors as well as statistical data. Reports not only affect how schools are perceived by parents and the local community but could lead to further interventions by outside agencies. They have a profound effect on teaching and learning.

Like all deep questions I was unable to give more than what I considered was a superficial response at the time. Later I recall talking to the academic who supervised my doctoral research, about the implications of exercising *power over* schools (inspections) as opposed to sharing *power with t*eachers through published research (Kreisberg, 1992). I was encouraged by the response *well at least you are doing something about the problems schools face rather than just criticizing them. After all, unlike many fulltime researchers attached to university departments you have regular access to all phases of education.*

As I reflect on a lengthy career in education I feel ready to revisit the question raised in the BERA conference twenty-three years ago and share what I feel I have learned from my experience of combining these apparently disparate roles.

2. Background

OFSTED was introduced in England because the government of the time had concerns about falling standards in schools and was suspicious that some local authority advisors were not being critical enough of the work undertaken. There were also concerns that because there was no National Curriculum children did not receive the same knowledge and understanding in all parts of the country.

Prior to these changes I was a specialist secondary teacher for 20 years before moving to work in a middle deemed secondary 9 - 13 school where my interest in the wider curriculum and assessment grew, informed by studying with the Open University. As a teacher-researcher (Stenhouse, 1975) my contact with research at master's level informed and allowed me to reflect on and develop my own practice. As a deputy head this knowledge and greater understanding also allowed me to become a force for change in the organization and system within which I worked. This was by no means an uncontested process. Focusing on pupils with learning difficulties in English procedures operating between a main feeder school and the middle school were analyzed. The findings highlighted strongly held theoretical divisions between the two styles of management, which compounded rather than aided the problems faced by this group of pupils. The middle school headteacher welcomed the report but the headteacher of the first school was offended by it, maintaining that deeply held beliefs concerning child development were under attack. Eisner (1991: p. 86) reminds us that evaluation is a form of criticism and that.

…every act of criticism is a reconstruction. The reconstruction takes the form of an argued narrative, supported by evidence that is never incontestable; there will always be alternative interpretations of the "same" play, as the history of crit-

icism so eloquently attests

Although the research informed and gradually led to improved provision for this group of pupils when they reached the middle school, the first school continued with their previous practice and liaison relationships were damaged rather than improved. This was my first understanding that

Commitment to what should be changed often varies inversely with knowledge about how to work through a process of change (Fullan, 1989: p. 183).

During the following years as I undertook more case studies and tried to implement change based on findings in my own organization I experienced similar frustrations to that experienced by the then new head teacher of Winchester school.

I have been struck by how innately conservative schools are. Because the routines are so demanding, there is a tendency for things to roll on and for the status quo to be maintained by vested interests (Judd, 2001: p. 18).

Before the introduction of OFSTED and a National Curriculum teachers like me had freedom to undertake research to the benefit of their pupils. Unfortunately, though well-intentioned these changes have meant that teachers in England are now so controlled by outside agencies that research of this kind, in my experience, has become the exception rather than the rule.

As a teacher of English I at first embraced the introduction of the National Curriculum because I recognized that the then current provision varied so widely between different schools. This was evident as we received new pupils from other parts of the country. I was also, as a middle year's teacher, keen to see better foundations in reading and writing established during the early years. When I took part in the two-year LINC project (Language in the National Curriculum, 1988) I did so enthusiastically believing it would benefit future practice. I was not prepared for the baby to be thrown out with the bath water. In the event this is what happened because a powerful lobby limited publication and much good, innovative material was lost. Within a few years the middle school system within which I had been working also proved a casualty as economic rationalization and standardization of provision proved the order of the day in the county within which I worked.

From this phase in my career I learned, as a teacher-researcher, that it is not easy for an insider to bring about democratic changes to the educational organization or system within which he/she works. Unless managers and teachers affected by the change understand why it should take place, and are willing to put it into practice, implementation may be at best partial. The LINC project experience and the decision to close a school that was working well gave me a different insight into the change process. These decisions were not democratic in nature but driven by theoretical or economic ideologies. In the examples given change occurred because the prevailing theoretical perspective of the day marginalized other less controllable ideologies with little apparent thought given as to what would be lost.

3. Inspector/Researcher

I could have chosen early retirement but I did not. With hindsight a mixture of curiosity about the new inspection system, a touch of passion for education (Salmon, 1992) and anger at what had happened proved powerful motivating factors. I had also just completed my masters and felt ready to undertake research at doctoral level. Faced with change, not of my choosing, I recognize now that I followed Fullan's philosophy

The most beneficial approach consists in our being able to understand change, locate our place in it, and act by influencing those factors, which are changeable and by minimizing the power of those, which are not. All of this requires a way of thinking about educational change which has not been characteristic of either planners or victims of past change effort (Fullan, 1989: p. 191).

In 1993 the training received by potential inspectors for the new system proved a good indication of what schools would soon be reporting as happening to them. Potential inspectors were isolated in a hotel and trained and tested over a four-day period with no feedback or encouragement. Some candidates left in despair and those who remained had no idea whether they were being judged as successes or failures. Local authority advisors faced the added strain that they would lose their current posts if they failed to gain accreditation. All I recall is that the more intolerable the situation became the more our team of fourteen individuals (originally strangers) bonded together and supported one another. There were no weak links. This was the training ground for the new inspection system. It would not be surprising given the emphasis on judgements and the power exerted over them if inspectors exerted too much power over schools. The teacher-researcher who raised the question may have been unlucky enough to have met such an individual. Realistically however sensitive you are as an inspector to the context evaluated if you work for an organization like OFSTED which has power over schools inevitably you are categorized accordingly and must allay fear every time you work in a school.

The questioner who challenged my position had an outsider's view of what it is to be an inspector but an insider's view of what it is to be inspected. Our point of contact was in our experience of the research process. She had no understanding of my wider experience or how research knowledge allowed me to retain a subjectivist-interpretivist (Carnahan, 1995) view of inspection. This is a perspective that acknowledges the world as constructed reality, in other words a product of human action and interaction and of the meaning that social actors attach to their experiences (Van Manen, 1992). Through contact with and understanding of research findings I retained a healthy skepticism for a system which places so much emphasis on examination results to improve provision (Fullan, 1991). As part of the system I acknowledge that I was privileged to gain access to schools and to be able to observe the effect of external and internal change on classroom practice.

In my time as an inspector, I grew to understand that school organizations

operate with multiple realities and that school context plays a big part in determining standards. At an early stage I also learned to set aside my preferred strategies (as a teacher) and give credit to alternative methods that work for others. Through dialogue with teachers, I offered opportunities for them to reflect on their own practice much as the teacher/researcher movement let me hold up a mirror to my own practice. However, whilst I observed and evaluated teaching skills and not the teachers themselves the teachers may not have drawn this fine distinction. As Gray and Wilcox (1995: p. 177) write *because competence in teaching lies at the heart of the professional self, teachers often have great difficulty in separating the two*.

Inspection did have an unexpected benefit for me as a researcher. As I observed a particular incident in a Design and Technology lesson my focus for my ongoing doctoral research came more sharply into focus.

A class of Year 7 pupils had been asked to fill in a self-assessment sheet as part of the technology process. The products they had made had not satisfied many of the criteria pupils had to evaluate their work against. The teacher gave no time for preparing her class for filling in the forms. One boy turned to me and whispered *what am I supposed to write about this*? As he held up his broken model.

This incident raised issues in my mind, regarding the purpose of self-assessment. Concern about this boy's experience led to the consideration of how apparently good ideas, like the opportunity to reflect upon what has been achieved before being able to move forward with one's learning (Sadler, 1989), may be diluted as they are turned into routines (self-assessment tick sheets) particularly when the use of such routines can easily become unquestioned norms in school practice,

In the years following this incident much has happened in the way schools are inspected as well as what is understood about formative assessment in school classrooms. Whilst for a time it seemed that schools would be more involved in school evaluation as the chief inspector Mike Tomlinson encouraged change

Schools, of necessity, are partners in the inspection process and I know that, without professionalism and good will of teachers, inspections would be significantly poorer. I want to see this partnership develop so that inspections really become something "done with" and not "done to" schools (Tomlinson, 2001: p. 7).

Research too seemed to be having a beneficial effect on educational policy as the Black and Wiliam (1998) review of formative assessment research caught ministers' attention as they highlighted the value for exam success for students with learning difficulties. Such results were based on experimental settings however and not real classrooms and whilst formative assessment strategies were rolled out across the country as my own research highlighted implementation was more complex (Burke, 2001). Today formative assessment is very evident in school classrooms but like the self-assessment sheet referred to earlier may have become another taken for granted strategy in many classrooms rather than an

empoweree of pupils' learning as pressure to succeed in tests became the norm (Burke, 2011).

Beneficial green shoots of change in inspection did not survive long as other ideological and economic perspectives prevailed. As I write teams of inspectors no longer spend time in schools with a light touch inspection by fewer individuals now being the norm. Judgements rely on statistical data.

Questions are a particularly good strategy when well employed in the classroom and elsewhere. The question which led to my writing this article certainly stimulated my metacognitive functions.

In writing this article I hope not only to raise awareness of the tensions which can arise between inspection, research, teaching and learning when change is too rapid in the Education system, where outsiders exercise *power over* schools without understanding the varied and complex nature of such establishments and also what could be lost as well as gained from such interventions.

Charles Desforges (Desforges, 2000) called for the barriers which exist in education to be pulled down. Maybe I am the eternal optimist but I look forward to the day when pupils are part of the same community of assessment practice (Wiliam, 1998) as their teacher and their teachers benefit from the philosophical stance offered by Rorty.

We can always enlarge the scope of "us" by regarding other people, or cultures, as part of the same community of inquiry as ourselves—by treating them as part of the group among whom unforced agreement is sought (Rorty, 1991: p. 38).

I ceased to inspect schools in 2004. My recent research continues to focus on pupils, how they learn and how ongoing government initiatives have often limited rather than improved their experiences particularly regarding the development of creativity.

As an agent of change I recognize that I will make little impact in improving the learning experience of pupils unless policy makers resolve some of the tensions existing at the level of evaluation and classroom assessment by recognizing that top-down change is rapid and often ill considered, democratic change takes longer to implement but is likely to prove more beneficial in the long run. This is as true of inspection as any other change process. By highlighting the tensions referred to in the title and expanded in the text I hope that I have raised issues in the minds of others so that a better balance can be established in the English education system. Yes standards are important, research findings inform but if change is too rapid; improvements may be slower because grass roots change ultimately depends on how senior managers take up and pursue ideas and encourage teachers to work through the implications for their practice not just individually but in departments and teams. In my experience the careful involvement of pupils and parents is also the key to effective learning. In a system where teachers have lost autonomy, creativity has suffered at the expense of the delivery of an often too narrow curriculum. There is clearly much to do to get the balance right for current and future generations of teachers and learners.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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