

LEGITIMIZING PRACTITIONER KNOWLEDGE

KEY TO EFFECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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The arguments in this manuscript are more fully developed in *Reaching for a Better Standard in American School Accountability: the New England Experiment*, which is currently in preparation. The LAB at Brown supported the early work on this manuscript.

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PREFACE

I owe a debt of gratitude to Jane Reed and James Learmonth for the paper they presented at ICSEI in January 2000, *Revitalising teachers' accountability: learning about learning as a renewed focus for school improvement*.

There is an even deeper connection between things English and things American in this presentation. It emerges from my cultivation of a set of ideas about how to learn about school practice that has its roots in the tradition of English school inspection (pre-OFSTED). I learned about English inspection in 1992, when I followed English school inspectors for ten months and talked with them about their work.

James Learmonth was key to that study. (He was then Chief Inspector in the Richmond Upon Thames school district.) Our many long conversations as we drove from Greenwich, across London to Richmond and back on almost a daily basis were essential to my making sense of what inspection is about.

While this presentation has English roots, it speaks to the rhetoric and practice of accountability in the American public school context. For this it owes a great deal to the vision and work of the leaders of the Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (CPSS/NEASC), the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), and the LAB at Brown.

This includes Pamela Gray-Bennett, Director of CPSS; Peter McWalters, Commissioner of Education for the State of Rhode Island; and Joe DiMartino, Director of the High School Initiative at the LAB. The Leadership Team for RIDE's School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT) requires special mention. Its members are Ken Fish, Director of SALT; Rick Richards, Project Manager; Susan Rotblat-Walker, Visit Coordinator; and Diane Devine, Training Coordinator. The eight Rhode Island teachers, who have served as SALT Fellows and who have chaired SALT Visit Teams, have made enormous contributions to our understanding of how the visit works as a methodology of practitioner inquiry. Susan represents SALT at the Congress today. She has played a key role in the successful implementation of the SALT school visit. Finally, I owe particular thanks to Rick for helping me chart some of the difficult conceptual terrain of American school accountability.

This presentation is based on a manuscript I am currently writing with start-up support from the LAB at Brown. I have time to sketch only some of the basic arguments of that work and some of what we have learned from it. This work is developing at a faster pace and with greater promise for improving public education than we even imagined.

PURPOSE

Let's begin with what this is really about. It is somewhat hidden. Consider this incident:

SALT Fellows are Rhode Island public school teachers who have been granted two-year leaves from their schools in order to chair SALT school visit teams. These visits are conducted under the auspices of the State Department of Education.

Near the end of the two-hour debriefing of the four Fellows who had just chaired their first four-day visit, JoAnn summed up her experience:

My worry was that I would end the week on Friday too exhausted to drive home safely. I thought I would be drained. Instead, I was riding on a wave of ecstasy as I drove through the darkness of those country roads in southern Rhode Island. I wanted to share the report with the world. This team of strangers had done remarkable work. I was ecstatic about the work we had done.

Sandy, an experienced chair, said:

Well, maybe your ecstasy was really exhaustion. But, you know, I still remember my first visit. And the ecstasy goes on. This is important and rewarding work.

Another well-seasoned chair added:

It's the work, the school, and the people. That's what it is.

Margaret, a new chair, summed up the murmurs, pushing the group to a quiet attentive pause:

This has been the best thing that's ever happened to me in all my years of teaching. It's the first time I've ever felt fully validated as a teacher. This is not something that happens to teachers in public schools.

This presentation is about that work. It is about what the chairs did that validated them as teachers and led to their ecstasy. It's about practitioner competence. It's about practice-based rigor, judgment, and knowledge. It's about the powerful influence these practice-based tools can exert to increase the effectiveness of accountability, which has the sole purpose of improving student learning.

THE ARGUMENT

The Reed/Learmonth paper built a convincing case that there is a tremendous potential and importance for teachers to learn directly from their daily practice about how their practice influences student learning and from that how they can improve it. The germane questions for teachers to ask themselves are:

How well are my students learning on a day-to-day basis in my classroom?

How well does my teaching stimulate their learning?

What can I do to improve my teaching practice?

Interestingly enough, these are quite similar to the questions that any good accountability system should ask:

How well are students learning?

What are schools and teachers doing to strengthen learning? What are they doing to hinder or prevent it?

What policies, incentives, and disincentives will work best to strengthen student learning?

This paper extends the Reed/Learmonth argument by joining it to accountability.¹ This joining of teacher learning with systemic accountability is symbiotic. Teacher learning gains legitimacy and accountability becomes more effective because of the more coherent, direct focus on learning and teaching.

The central assumptions are that:

Accountability is best considered as a set of constructs and organizational systems that can be designed and judged in terms of their utility and function.

The central purpose of accountability in public education is to improve student learning.

Systemic coherence in the design and operation of a system of accountability is central to its effectiveness, given the real tensions that exist in teaching and learning, the way schools function on a daily basis, and the uneven patterns of authority in state, district and school governance.

¹ A cautionary note to the reader: accountability in this sentence slips from how Reed/Learmonth define it for the English context to how it is defined in the American context. My hope is that what follows will be helpful enough for people in both countries to rationalize my making the jump without a long discursive discussion of the differences.

Coherence for accountability results from definitions, procedures, and structures that aim as directly as possible at the purpose of improving student learning.

The effectiveness of the definitions and systems of American school accountability is uncertain. In simple terms, government agencies are accountable for setting up accountability systems; teachers are accountable for raising test scores; and principals are accountable for leading the teachers onward. This concept of accountability, which gives such different responsibilities to each of the major actors in the public school system, lacks operational coherence. One set of actors can claim to do their part and blame the others for the lack of improvement in learning. It fails to focus directly on the public purpose of accountability—improved student learning. Its structure provides more clarity about what government agencies should do than it does about what teachers should do. Teachers are the ones whose work is most directly tied to student learning.

The argument here is that we must redefine accountability if it is to be effective in meeting its purpose. Joining teacher learning with accountability introduces a new approach: Practice-Based Accountability. The focus here is on what paid school professionals actually do—their daily practice. Practice-Based Accountability strengthens the position of teachers, as practicing professionals, by recognizing the inherent value of their knowledge, judgment, and ability to improve their teaching practice. That link makes it possible for accountability to aim directly at the central purpose of improved student learning. That changes what leaders, policy makers, and government agencies can do to meet their public responsibilities.

Teacher knowledge about teaching and learning, their professional judgment about what learning is, their knowledge of how and when their students learn, and their ability to judge and change their own practice, all become tools of Practice-Based Accountability.

A major roadblock to Practice-Based Accountability has been the sensible requirement that accountability systems must rely on legitimate, measured (objective) results. Measurement has been the Achilles' heel of accountability. What teachers say they know from their practice has not been seen as legitimate enough to count for the purpose of "real" accountability.

Throughout both England and the United States, policy makers, researchers, and the general public—often practitioners themselves—believe what school practitioners say about their practice is suspect. When setting policy, making decisions, or holding schools accountable, the only findings about student performance that educational evaluators or government accountability managers consider to be legitimate are those that are backed by "real" data. Many believe that only real data

makes clear what really goes on in schools and that it alone will protect them from accusations of being stupid, unfair, or both. It is legion in public education to consider results legitimate only if they are “objective” or have been subjected to statistical analysis. It is difficult to raise the possibility that “real data” may reside elsewhere.

It is commonly believed that practitioners, who work daily with the issues, problems, and successes of teaching and learning can present only nice stories, illustrative vignettes, or anecdotal information about what they do. That doesn't count as “real” data about what they do.

THE NEW ENGLAND EXPERIMENT

Something quite unexpected is beginning to happen in many New England schools. The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) and the Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (CPSS/NEASC) have charted a different course.

Leaders of these two agencies believe that an accountability system is not effective unless it brings about improved learning. They believe accountability systems must both push and support schools to improve their provision of student learning. If accountability is to realize its full potential, what teachers know, how they think, and what they do must be placed squarely in the center. Each of the above agencies has worked in a different, yet parallel, way to build a new system of accountability that depends on practitioner knowledge and that supports teachers' skills and judgment. These are not pilot programs. Both systems are being implemented fully in all Rhode Island public schools and in 95% of all secondary schools in the New England region for a total of over 900 schools. Both systems are a renewed form of accountability—what I call Practice-Based Accountability.

Since legitimacy of results is so critical in accountability, the question to address first is how RIDE and CPS/NEASC have dealt with the legitimacy of their practice-based approaches.

Both agencies have given concerted attention to a school visit of practitioner peers. This form of inquiry is common in both American accreditation and English school inspection. Although each organization has developed and implemented a visit protocol to fit their different organizational functions and histories, their protocols are quite similar:

Both deliberately push and support a visiting team of peers to come to know what actually is happening in a particular school, to judge its worth, and to write a public report about how well that school is performing.

Both focus first on student learning and teaching in the school.

Both assert that the central test for a conclusion is that it must be accurate. The visit team is as certain as it can be that its conclusions are based on the evidence it has generated about what is actually happening at that school. A conclusion can have no value in holding a school accountable or supporting it, if the visit team's intent is either to be nice to the school or to demolish it.

Both are explicit that it is not the purpose of the inquiry to build generalizations about what schools are and what makes them

function. It is to push a particular school to increase the learning it provides. The team uses this definition of usefulness to test its conclusions, while it is constructing them, and to test the report, while it is writing it.

Both are built from a set of principles, based on the traditions in both England and the United States, for how to instill rigor in the school visit.

In short, these two New England agencies have met the challenge of legitimacy by constructing a practice-based method of inquiry that ensures focus and rigor and that produces legitimate practice-based knowledge about how well a school and its teachers are doing.

Even more amazing, when the nature of the visit is understood, the legitimacy of the findings of the practitioner teams is fully accepted, often embraced. School practitioners, legislators, state department staff, reporters, and parents usually find these practice-based findings more legitimate and useful than test-based findings about educational performance. This legitimacy has become an important factor in the growth of this work for both RIDE and CPSS/NEASC.

Practitioner learning becomes stronger, when it is rooted in a rigorous method of inquiry. When the voice, knowledge, and skills of teachers generate legitimate knowledge about good teaching and learning, the “empowerment” of teachers assumes a new and startling meaning. Teaching at last begins to take its rightful place among the other practitioner professions. Practice-based professions must have a system for ensuring that their practitioners know what good practice is, for ensuring that practitioners can learn from what they actually do, and for ensuring that the profession will speak out on how well its practice is being carried out.

This is what the SALT fellows meant when they said their ecstasy in conducting SALT visits was about the work they had done. Although it is not always easy for a team to put into words what the evidence indicates, teams gain great satisfaction in writing a report that matters and that clearly has been formed by what they saw and what they thought about what they saw. Almost to a person, team members claim that serving on a visit team has been the most powerful professional development they have experienced.

THE LEGITIMACY OF THE SCHOOL VISIT

The central task for this paper is to describe how the design and conduct of an actual school visit ensures its rigor as a research methodology that generates legitimate findings about the nature and quality of actual school practice.

The questions are:

What happens on a school visit?

Why is generating knowledge the central purpose of a visit?

What does it mean to call the visit a research methodology?

What are the corner stones of the visit methodology?

What are the principles for conducting a visit?

What is an example of visit findings?

Overview of what happens on a school visit²

The School: The school is a complex place of continuous and frequently unpredictable interactions devoted to the complex task of teaching and student learning. Visit team members often find themselves in spaces that the school considers private.

The Team: The school visit is first of all a real human event. A group of visitors, mostly teachers and administrators from other districts, visit a school from three to five days while it is in session. The team follows a schedule that has been carefully designed to maximize the visit as a process of peer inquiry. Depending on the size and complexity of the visited school, between five and seventeen members make up a visit team. Most team members are practicing public school teachers. A practicing teacher chairs each team. (A school administrator usually chairs the CPSS/NEASC teams.) Team members seldom come from the same district as the visited school. Other team members may be members of institutions of higher education, school committees, school districts or the state department. The team members have never worked together before as a group. They often are complete strangers to one another. In the beginning they are bound together only by their common experience as teachers and school principals or by their deep interest in schools.

During the first three days of the visit the team attends to what is actually happening inside the school, with a particular focus on what is

² What follows is based primarily on the SALT visit *Handbook*. Much of that applies to both CPSS/NEASC and SALT. Nevertheless, there are some differences between them that are not fully developed here. The most important difference is that SALT uses three focus areas and CPS/NEASC uses seven standards for accreditation.

happening in its classrooms. The team spends the fourth day completing its written report.

The Team Chair: The team chair helps the team meet the challenge of doing its extraordinary work well. Clarity and good humor make that possible. Teaching a team how the visit works as a methodology for knowing a school is the most important contribution a chair makes to the quality of the team's report. As the guardian of the methodology, the chair makes certain that the team's findings are accurate, legitimate, and clear. The chair facilitates each team to use the methodology effectively to learn about a specific school.

The Visit Outcome—The Team Report: The team is charged to write a public report containing its considered findings about how well a school is doing in several substantive areas. (For SALT there are three SALT focus areas: (1) Learning, (2) Teaching, and (3) The School. For CPSS/NEASC there are seven standards for accreditation.) The report includes only those conclusions that have met the required tests for conclusions as specified by the visit methodology. The tests are accuracy (as determined by the team's evidence), fairness, and presence; in addition each conclusions must show the team's judgment. The team must reach consensus agreement that the report has passed each of these tests.

To ensure the legitimacy and value of the report, the chair is responsible for seeing that the team follows the procedures of the visit as closely as possible.

It is quite extraordinary that in so few days a team of peers can prepare a public report of its conclusions about how well it thinks the school is performing. (SALT reports are about 20 pages. The report is completed on the last day of the visit and is ready to be read to the school's faculty three days later.) It is even more extraordinary that these reports are unusually accurate, fair, constructive, and well written.

Schools have found visit reports more relevant to their work than most reports they receive about their performance.

How knowledge is central to the visit

The central guiding purpose for conducting a school visit is for the team to generate knowledge about the state of the actual performance and practice in a school, as a public institution of teaching and learning. This knowledge is based on the actual, complex, daily practice at the school during the time of the visit. This knowledge of daily practice, which is critical for the purpose of both accountability and school support, often eludes traditional school research methodologies.

The team's knowledge of a school forms the substance of its conclusions, making it possible for the team to word each conclusion so that it is fair

both to the school and its constituents. The team's recommendations for action also are based on this knowledge.

By the end of the visit the team must know the school so well that each team member is certain that each written conclusion, reporting how well the school is doing, is accurate and fair enough to stand as a public statement. When a team's knowledge of a school is fair and accurate, it has an excellent chance of helping the school improve its practice. All audiences, both within the school and without, will judge the value of the team's report upon the quality and depth of its knowledge.

All this explains the necessity for an explicit, legitimate research methodology for knowing a school.

The visit as a research methodology

A research methodology is designed to ensure that the information and knowledge generated by an inquiry is legitimate. It does that by defining how an inquiry is conducted.

A research methodology answers the following questions:

What is the necessary focus and how is that achieved?

What is evidence?

How is evidence collected?

What makes a finding valid?

For a visit to be considered a research methodology, the way a team generates its findings must be articulate and clear. A private, idiosyncratic approach to information, which no one else can articulate, is not a methodology. It is not a methodology if its primary purpose is group facilitation, planning, professional development, organizational development, or auditing compliance. A research methodology is subject to thoughtful revision in order to improve the inquiry. Such revision is based on past experience with the methodology, new technology, or constructs that improve the collection and analysis of the information.

The school visit has been practiced for almost 100 years in America and for more than 160 years in England. Careful studies of both traditions by Catalpa Ltd. have found that, in spite of the differences between them, these traditions are based on a similar methodology for knowing schools and that the fundamentals of that methodology can be described.³

A research methodology is shaped by the demanding problems of collecting information about what is under study. The end result is knowledge. But that knowledge cannot be specified beforehand as that would slant the methodology and make it unreliable. The methodology

³Thomas A. Wilson, *Reaching for a Better Standard* (Teachers College Press, 1996); *Visiting Accreditation* (LAB at Brown, 1998); *Foundations of the Catalpa School Visit* (Catalpa Ltd., 1999).

for knowing a school must be open ended; it must be able to deliver surprise. Even though the end result cannot be predetermined, how that knowledge is generated must be carefully specified. A methodology must make clear and explicit how what is learned is known.

Fortunately, the visit is a relatively simple methodology. It brings professional judgment to bear on the actual life of schools.

The corner stones of the school visit

INTRODUCTION

The corner stones distinguish the school visit as a research methodology. They are firmly based in the school visit tradition. They make it possible for a school visit team to learn about a school. They are the basis for substantive and valid conclusions. They ensure that the visit inquiry remains open ended and does not become a simple routine exercise that is repeated in every host school.

These corner stones are:

- ◆ Professional Judgment
- ◆ Evidence
- ◆ Deliberate Consensus Agreement
- ◆ Logistics

PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT

Professional judgment and the problem of human perception

How people think about what they see shapes not only what they see but also how they explain what they see. We use different terms to express what we bring to what we see, including perspective, perception, point-of-view, lens, bias, prejudice, belief, expectations, standards, and baggage. Yet, most of us strongly agree on the underlying idea—what we know shapes what we see.

All methodologies for generating knowledge must wrestle with this defining aspect of how people think, how they perceive their worlds, and how they select the details to which they attend. The legitimacy and acceptance of research findings depends in large part on how well the methodology has wrestled with these human and personal preconceptions and biases.

In the school visit professional judgment is the muscle for that wrestling.

It is commonly believed that the evaluation of school performance must be “objective,” usually meaning that judgment must be excluded from the evaluation process as much as possible. It is also commonly believed that in order for the measurement of one school to be fair, it must be as

consistent as possible with how every other school is measured. Most educational inquiry procedures try to minimize the use of judgment in service of the belief that research methodology should ensure objectivity and consistency. Thus, the explicit use of judgment in the visit seems strange at first.

In general many are skeptical about the judgment of those who work in education— policy makers and education administrators are most guilty. While they may wish it were otherwise, many will say quite directly, “We don’t trust the judgment of teachers.” We rely so heavily on “objective” test score information partly because we do not trust teachers and their professional organizations to judge student and peer performance.

Other professions trust the professional judgment of their members. It is their judgment about their practice and the results of that judgment that makes their work professional. Professional associations often go to great length to ensure that the government and the public understand and accept the importance of their judgment as practitioners. Associations safeguard their professions from regulations and procedures that unreasonably restrict their members from exercising professional judgment as a central part of their practice.

Professional judgment is essential in our courts and legal systems, which most would agree are our most important and effective systems of public accountability. The judgment of a jury is not only central to executing justice, but also to developing case law. Our legal system assumes that professional judgment is legitimate. While professional procedures are subject to court review, the legitimacy of using professional judgment to decide legal issues is not. Even when one professional witness challenges the judgment of another, the court system affirms, rather than discredits, the value of professional judgment.

In the school visit the explicit use of professional judgment not only makes the findings valuable, but it also makes the team’s inquiry possible. Other research methodologies are not designed to do that. Professional judgment makes it possible for the team to consider the complex, real life of a school in real time, to make sense of the school within the severe time limitations of the visit, and to build conclusions about how well the school is performing that are both legitimate and constructive for the school. Without the explicit use of team judgment, the visit does not work well as a methodology for generating valuable knowledge.

Professional judgment makes it possible for a team to consider the countless pieces of possible evidence—each having a myriad of possible meanings—that are part of coming to understand, as directly as possible, the actual life of a complex institution. A team’s professional judgment holds the inquiry process together and gives the team findings coherence.

Individual judgment that is not tested or challenged—that sees only what it knows—holds little value for an inquiry. The collection of evidence, the team’s deliberations, and the requirement for deliberate consensus agreement all refine and check the team’s judgment.

How professional judgment works on a visit team

Each team member works to develop the overall professional judgment of the team. While the team as a whole determines its overall judgment of the school, it builds that judgment upon the professional judgments of each individual team member, which includes the judgment each one actually uses in thinking about teaching and learning or about how well a school is operating. An individual team member’s judgment is based on her knowledge and teaching (and other school) experience, as well as on her standards and expectations for how a teacher should teach and what she must do to improve her own teaching. (The state’s formal standards, which each team member knows, may or may not be a major factor in each one’s actual criteria for judging a school, even though team members are told they should be.)

The visit methodology seeks to use the diverse judgments of team members as a key inquiry tool, rather than to avoid or diminish them in order to build an “objective” report. Each team member begins the visit with his own private observations of the school, which have been shaped by his individual professional judgment. Of course, the maturity and complexity of the judgment of each one is different. If they were asked to eliminate their professional judgment, team members would have nothing to bounce their evidence against to decide what was important for them to notice and why. The visit compels them to discuss their early “pre-judgments” among themselves in order to moderate and balance them, while at the same time each one continues to observe the school. The team expects its members to share what they are thinking about the school and what they have observed. During their “reporting back” sessions and countless informal team discussions, team members come to see their separate and common perceptions of the school. From this, as well as from the specific evidence it gathers about the school, the team generates its overall and unanimous judgment.

This process requires each team member to become more responsible for what he sees and thinks. It requires individual members to test their personal views and makes advocacy of interest group agendas irrelevant and easy to control. The process strongly supports the team’s sense of what is accurate and fair to conclude.

Professional judgment—both that of individual team members and especially that of the team as a whole—evolves during the visit. The team makes its professional judgment quite explicit in its report, through what might be called “the team’s voice.”

Since the central theme of the inquiry is for team members to “Know what they see; not what they know,” it is essential that the visit challenge the inevitable pre-judgments that each individual team member brings to it. Although much of a school visit protocol is designed toward that end, a team’s judgment is never final, infallible, or static. Rather than seeking to eliminate the voice of individual team members, the visit protocol seeks to harness these voices into a unified perception and voice. This has proved to be a powerful and flexible tool of inquiry.

EVIDENCE

Introduction

Although it is defined differently, evidence is as essential to the visit methodology as it is to social science-based methodologies. Without evidence, judgment would remain pre-judgment. A visit that did not maximize the team’s ability to collect accurate evidence about the school would soon become an exercise in self-indulgence.

The team learns about the school it is visiting and makes sense of it by collecting and sorting evidence. At its most basic, visit evidence is the verbal and numerical representations of the actual life of the school and its performance that team members notice and discuss with one another.

The significant business of evidence

The purpose of the visit is to consider the actual life of the school. The visit is unique in the education research methodologies because of its ability to consider what is actually happening in a school and its classrooms on a day-to-day basis. However, that concentration leads to an imprecise, flexible, and complex definition of evidence.

Visit evidence is, first of all, about the actual life of the school—the actions, perceptions, results, and interpretations of what things mean in a school. Most visit protocols insist that the visit team’s central focus must be the primary function of a school—teaching and learning.

Visit evidence comes from multiple sources, including test scores; surveys; observations of classes; examination of student work; interviews and conversations with students, teachers, administrators, and parents; observation of school meetings; and the review of school documents (plans, budgets, evaluative reports, e.g. the accreditation association report).

Most observers of the visit methodology agree that the strength of the team’s conclusions and the value of its report will be determined by how well the team has collected evidence about the actual life of the school.

What is different about visit evidence?

Visit evidence is not precisely defined before an actual visit takes place. “What do I look for?” is a common question new team members ask. The answer is, “Wait and see.”

Visit evidence is based in the school in real-time. It is not data that measures a variable. It is a team member’s verbal representation of a small segment of the school’s actual life, structure, or context. In team discussion, admissible evidence is limited to what team members actually have seen, heard, or read about the school during the very short time they are there.

In the visit methodology evidence is not static. Even when team members have initially identified a piece of evidence, they will collect other evidence that either confirms or discredits it. When they discover a discrepancy in the evidence, they are compelled to collect additional evidence to resolve it. If the team cannot come to a clear resolution, it does not use the evidence in question.

The team selects the evidence it will pursue based on the conclusions it begins to construct. Thus, working-conclusions and working-evidence are closely linked in a dynamic relationship in which they simultaneously test one another: the evidence tests the conclusions; the conclusions test the evidence. Evidence becomes static, only after the team has reached final agreement on what its conclusions will be. The dynamics of the visit inquiry end when the team has reached final agreement, when it has locked its evidence in place as certain. Evidence then plays the more usual role of supporting a conclusion.

The team’s collective memory is the central repository of evidence. Individual team members keep notes about what they see and report that to the team at set meetings. The team is the final judge of when there is enough certain evidence to support a conclusion.

The team as a whole decides what evidence to collect, how to verify existing evidence, how to resolve discrepancies in evidence, and when to decide with certainty that it has accurate evidence for a conclusion. This key guideline gives the team the needed control of the inquiry so it can shape its conclusions to the particular school it is visiting. The team must unanimously decide if a conclusion is final and agree that it has the necessary evidence to support it. (See Deliberate Consensus Agreement below.)

When evidence is defined in this way, teams must work their way from their first observations to their final conclusions. It is impossible, and even contrary to the visit methodology, to require the team to keep track of the precise pieces of evidence it has, in fact, used. Thus, the visit methodology requires the team to indicate “the source of the evidence,” rather than the specific piece of evidence, used in its final report.

This definition of evidence deliberately encourages teams to seek evidence that is not limited by the requirement that it be “objective” and to reach conclusions that are based on other than precise definitions of what constitutes evidence. Unlike more familiar research methodologies, the legitimacy of the team’s findings does not rest on precision, but rather on the requirement that team members must and can dispute each other’s evidence. The legitimacy of the visit methodology is powerfully supported by the requirement that, before evidence can be used, the team must reach deliberate consensus agreement that it is correct.

Even though it is unexpected, this definition of evidence in the visit methodology makes sense. Defining evidence in this way makes it possible for the visit team to inquire quickly and in a meaningful way about the complex, actual life of a school.

The rules for visit evidence

Evidence must exist in the school. It is seen, heard, or read by one or more team members during the visit. Team members may use their prior knowledge and/or opinions of a school to formulate questions and guide the team’s evidence gathering. However, the team cannot use its prior knowledge of the school as evidence to support its conclusions, unless it has verified that during the visit. Unverified knowledge is considered “hearsay” evidence and it is not admissible.

Any team member may challenge the accuracy of any evidence introduced to the team discussion.

When the team considers evidence that it has not generated, such as state test results, the SALT survey, an accreditation report, or an evaluation report of a program in the school, it must consider that evidence in a manner that is consistent with the rules that governed its collection and interpretation. For example, the team cannot banter about test scores without regarding the discipline, procedures, and rules that generated them or the decisions that give them significance.

A team member must not use evidence that the team as a whole does not accept as certain to support a conclusion. If a team member feels that the team has made a wrong decision about the accuracy of a piece of evidence, her first task is to persuade her team members to re-examine the evidence in question.

When a team reaches a final deliberate consensus agreement on a conclusion, it must again consider whether it has the evidence to support that conclusion.

DELIBERATE CONSENSUS AGREEMENT

Introduction

The team reaches all of its important decisions by deliberate consensus agreement. This gives the process and the report legitimacy.

Deliberate consensus is an explicit tool to ensure that the team as a whole takes seriously all the perspectives and evidence that each individual member considers important. It is similar to the approach to decision-making used by the American Friends (Quakers).

The use of the word deliberate is deliberate! It does not mean that the team will come to general agreement to move public issues forward, as seen in examples such as “Senator X is a masterful builder of consensus,” or “The public has reached consensus on the importance of standards in education.”

Unlike hypothesis testing or data-driven methodologies, the legitimacy of the findings of this conclusion-driven process cannot depend on a precise definition of evidence, carefully controlled evidence-collecting procedures, or the specialized rigor of statistical testing. The legitimacy of the team’s findings depends on how the team makes the decisions that shape its conclusions.

As the basis for the actual and perceived legitimacy of the team’s conclusions, the team must consistently work to arrive at deliberate consensus with the greatest rigor possible. Therefore, the team is required to come to deliberate consensus agreement on all major decisions that determine its public findings, including how it presents these findings in the written report.

It is not the purpose of deliberate consensus to facilitate a non-threatening, cooperative experience for the team, where every member’s ideas count equally. Rather it is a tool to test the team’s professional certainty that what it reports is right. Deliberate consensus agreement is required in order to push the team to resolve its own ambiguities, correct any discrepancies in evidence, and limit ambiguity in how it words each of its conclusions. Thus, deliberate consensus strengthens the underlying rigor and legitimacy of the final report.

The requirement of deliberate consensus implies that each team member must pay close attention to what every other member has to say. It pushes team members to be open about the uncertainties they see in the evidence they have found and to raise disagreements with other team members about issues of judgment. It requires team members to resolve discrepancies and work out disagreements among themselves so that they can complete their most important task—building conclusions. It pushes the team to find better evidence and to come to better decisions.

This increases the likelihood that the team will come to accurate conclusions and that it will find balance in its point of view. It provides strong, accepted legitimacy for the report findings. Deliberate consensus of a group of professional peers is well accepted. Team members often feel considerable team pride and cohesion because they know they have accomplished some important work together.

How deliberate consensus works for a team

Each team member, including the chair, must agree on the decisions that determine the team's findings.

Team members do not bargain in order to reach agreement; deliberate consensus is not the basis of the sort of compromise that is so common in political decision-making. It is out of the question for team members to come to a decision by vote; even straw votes are discouraged. The purpose of this requirement is not to foster agreement in itself as a good and worthwhile team process. The underlying purpose of deliberate consensus is to ensure that the visit at heart builds accurate conclusions.

Any member of the team has the power and authority to stop a decision simply by not agreeing to it. If any member does not agree and if the team sees no benefit in further discussion, the team will not include that conclusion in its report. Minority reports are not permitted.

Deliberate consensus agreement promotes greater shared knowledge about the school and about the team's judgment. If a team member disagrees about an issue that the rest of the team considers critical, the team must then work through what it knows so that it can reach certainty in its agreement. Sometimes this involves trying to persuade a dissenting team member to change his point of view, which the others see as being out of synch with the evidence. Sometimes the team must rethink the evidence that seemed to support its original conclusion. Sometimes the team must collect additional evidence to resolve the issue. As often happens, the team may come a new insight that promotes a new agreement or it may find new evidence that supports the dissenting point of view. Regardless, it must revise any conclusion under question or drop it entirely. These possibilities all work to build the team's certainty about what it knows and serve to strengthen the final report. If the team does not reach deliberate consensus and if an issue under question is not central, the team will let it go and move on to other issues.

Deliberate consensus agreement clarifies that this is a team report, not an edited amalgamation of reports written by individual team members. This discourages team members from framing their thoughts in a personal way, i.e., "What I think" versus "what you think." It encourages them to find mutual answers in a more knowledge-based discussion about the actual life of the school.

While it might sound too idealistic to work well, it actually does. Because the report is a team report, because the time of the visit is limited, because the report is important to the school, the team is wary of becoming bogged down in endless discussion about any one point.

The evidence-based nature of the inquiry is the feature of the visit that contributes most to the high degree of agreement that all teams develop. The process continually pushes the team to consider what it has observed about the actual life of the school during the short time it is there. Educators are more likely to disagree about abstract and polarized issues--such as the value of phonic versus whole language, vocational versus college education, or special education versus general education--than they are to disagree about the nature of the teaching they have seen in a classroom. Even discussions of disembodied statistical data frequently stirs more basic disagreement than discussions of team members working to draw conclusions from what they have seen together in the context of the actual life of a school.

LOGISTICS

The logistic details of the visit are important.

Just as test results are affected by how a test is in fact administered, the results of a visit are affected by how the logistics are organized and carried out.

The visit is a “practical, hands-on, live event.” How team members behave as visitors, how the team behaves as a team, how the school behaves as a host—all make a difference. How well the school understands the team’s purpose and how well it works with the team is closely tied to how well it hosts the team.

A school shows that it understands the nature of the team’s work by providing a workroom that fits the team’s working needs. Rooms that are too small, poorly heated, dimly lit, or subject to frequent interruptions diminish the team’s ability to work well.

Schools must keep in mind that they are hosting school practitioners from other schools. Team members appreciate being welcomed by the school. However, when a school obviously has gone overboard to create a good impression, a team will question its priorities. Because of their experience in public schools, team members understand that the physical world of a school is never perfect and they will easily accommodate themselves to what a school can provide.

When it is obvious that a host doesn’t think much of their company and/or if they don’t feel welcome, guests will find a visit difficult. It is easy for a school to give a team this impression. It may simply fail to provide clear directions to the restrooms; it may not provide coffee for the long meetings, or it may provide snacks that no one wants to eat. A

school can frustrate team members and their work in any number of ways. Occasionally, when it is upset with RIDE or SALT for one reason or another, a school will fail to see the team members as guests who are making a considerable investment of their time and energy to be helpful to the school. It may treat the team as another icon in its continuing battle about other issues.

Although the school has to manage many details as host of the visit, the team's responsibility for the details of being a good visitor is also difficult.

The team spends only a short time inside the school. That is a real limit of the visit. The team has a professional responsibility to carry out as rigorous and insightful an inquiry as possible. It must constantly work hard to take care of the multiple details necessary to make the visit work.

Further, paying attention to carrying out the logistic details of the visit is important in an unusual way. How well these details are implemented will directly shape the evidence the team collects. If team members straggle into a meeting, if they don't ask the school questions that are directly related to their inquiry, if they are abrasive or arrogant, the quality and quantity of the evidence they collect will definitely be affected. If the chair forgets to give the team critical instructions about how the methodology works, if he is sloppy about making team assignments, if he doesn't start meetings on time, the group process will not only suffer, but the substance of the team's work will suffer as well.

Finally, how both the school and the team manage their respective details can make the crucial difference in how the school hears and treats the team report. If it sees that the visit was well run and feels that the team members acted as good, professional guests, the school is much more likely to view the report as worthy of being taken seriously, even if it believes the team has been too harsh.

The principles for conducting a school visit⁴

These principles serve as guides for conducting the visit. They help the team understand the methodology of the visit and how to think about the school as they inquire about the school and prepare their written report. These principles also ensure the rigor of the visit in the countless decisions that the chair and team must make while the visit is in process. The detailed definitions, descriptions of critical components—

⁴ RIDE and Catalpa Ltd. *The Handbook for Chairs of a SALT School Visit, 1st Edition*, 2000. When the *Handbook* was written in fall 2000, sixty-five Rhode Island public schools had hosted SALT school visits, during the three years of developing the visit as a critical component of the state's school accountability system. *The Handbook* was prepared as part of the work to fully establish an ongoing cycle of 60 visits a year to meet the state department's goal that each school in the state would host a visit once every five years. (With CPSS/NEASC agreement, SALT visits in Rhode Island high schools will alternate every five years with CPSS/NEASC accreditation visits.) Copies of the *Handbook* are available from the SALT office at RIDE.

such as the outline of the report, the team's schedule, the tests for conclusions, and the steps for completing each of the visit events over four days—take up 100 pages in the *Handbook for SALT Visit Chairs*.

- PRINCIPLE 1:** **The team must write a legitimate report.**
- PRINCIPLE 2:** **The team must build legitimate conclusions.**
- PRINCIPLE 3:** **The team must gather accurate, relevant evidence.**
- PRINCIPLE 4:** **The team must exercise forthright judgment.**
- PRINCIPLE 5:** **The team must test the legitimacy of both its conclusions and the report.**
- PRINCIPLE 6:** **The team must reach its decisions by deliberate consensus.**
- PRINCIPLE 7:** **The team must recognize the rigor in the SALT visit schedule that is imposed by limited time.**
- PRINCIPLE 8:** **The team must use the focus areas to limit and shape the substance of its report.**
- PRINCIPLE 9:** **The team must attend to the logistical details of the visit.**
- PRINCIPLE 10:** **The team must operate with clear expectations.**

Sample of conclusions from a SALT visit report

The best way to establish that the visit produces legitimate findings is to present some findings excerpted from a recent SALT Visit Team Report. This visit was conducted well, according to the protocol. (The full protocol is available in the *Handbook for SALT Visit Chairs*.) The chair of this visit was leading her third team. SALT conclusions are presented in three areas: learning, teaching, and the school. The primary question for each conclusion is, "How well is ___ being carried out in the school's actual practice?" The team wrote the report together using an LCD projector. That allowed them to reach consensus agreement about not only each conclusion, but also about almost every word in the report.

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT LEARNING⁵

Some students write well when engaged in activities such as journaling, essay development, research papers, reflections, brochures, script writing in media classes, and expository writing. These activities contribute to the increase in the percentage of students meeting the standard on the New Standards Reference Examination Writing Effectiveness subtest (16%-34%), over the last two years. Additionally, the percentage of students achieving the standard on the Rhode Island Writing Assessment indicates a steady gain (45%-56%) over the last four years. However, many students engage in writing one-word answers, fill in the blanks, short answers, and in completing worksheets. These activities alone do not contribute to improved writing effectiveness. *(classroom observations, examination of student work, conversations and interviews with students, New Standards Reference Examination results, Rhode Island Writing Assessment results, SALT Survey 2000 teacher and student responses)*

Many students are reading well in various subject areas. Students are reading, reflecting, analyzing, interpreting, and discussing a variety of genres and formats. Performance scores on the New Standards Reference Exam Reading: Basic Understanding subtest increased (42%-53%). Reading: Analysis and Interpretation scores have increased (21%-52%). Unfortunately, nearly half the students tested did not achieve the standard on these subtests. *(classroom observations, New Standards Reference Examination results, student following, conversations and interviews with parents, teachers, students, and school administrators, examining student work)*

All special education students failed to achieve the standard on the four subtests of the New Standards Reference Examination. Like many of their general education peers, they are engaging in writing one-word answers, fill in the blanks, short answers and completing worksheets. They are not engaging in learning math skills, concepts, and/or problem solving across the curriculum. Nearly half the students tested in reading did not achieve the standard; 100% of the special education students are among this group. This is unacceptable. *(2000 Information Works!, New Standards Reference Examination, classroom observations, conversations and interviews with school administrators)*

Some students want more say in their learning. They have little input in their daily class activities. Also, students want teachers to coordinate the due dates of various assignments so that projects, papers, and tests are more evenly distributed. This will encourage active participation and self-

⁵ While all schools are clearly identified by all SALT reports, I chose not to identify the school involved. The SALT reports are meant to be read as a whole and this sampling, which is based on my judgment for a different purpose, distorts the team's judgment of what the overall message to the school should be. All of the reports are posted on the web at www.ridoe.net/schoolimprove/salt.

motivation. *(conversations and interviews with students, student following, classroom observations)*

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT TEACHING

Some teachers use creative approaches to involve their students and facilitate learning. They incorporate projects, debates, role-playing, simulations, group and individual presentations, video production, real world applications, problem solving and other critical thinking activities. Some take advantage of the resources in the Library Media Center. These approaches actively involve students in meaningful and in-depth learning. Other teachers rely heavily on lecturing, note taking, and completing worksheets. Too much class time is spent in homework and review, rather than in providing instruction that provokes learning. These practices do not allow students to develop critical thinking skills and may contribute to low student interest and performance. *(classroom observations, student following, SALT Survey 2000, conversations, interviews and meetings with school administrators and students)*

Some teachers have low expectations for their students. Their assignments lack challenge and are devoid of opportunities for revisions and retakes to reach high standards. This limits performance, leads to passivity, and discourages students from striving to reach their maximum potential. *(classroom observations, student following, SALT Survey 2000, conversations, interviews and meetings with teachers, parents and students)*

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE SCHOOL

This school climate creates a safe, friendly environment. There is an atmosphere of mutual respect that promotes an educational tone conducive to effective teaching and learning. The administration actively promotes the changing of student behavior and fosters mutual respect based on mutual trust. *(Background Information for the School Improvement Plan, SALT Survey 2000, meetings and conversations with administration and students, student following)*

The scope of responsibility of department chairs hinders effective leadership. The number of tasks, the varying structure of department based and team based duties, and the accountability to two building principals make their job impossible. The selection process fosters divisiveness. *(meetings and conversations with teachers and department chairs, the School's 1998-2001 Teacher Contract)*

FINAL ADVICE TO THE SCHOOL

Rhody regional high school is experiencing a very exciting and unsettling time in the process of transforming itself into a fine school with high

expectations and high standards for learning. Many components needed to make this happen are evident here. The new principal is clearly defining a path to reach this goal. She is an educational leader with a vision and the people skills to get the job done. Teachers and parents speak highly of their new administrator. There is an increased feeling of trust and open communication. She, in turn, uses her enthusiasm and energy to impact programs and student success.

Many teachers and staff work hard and successfully contribute to the school's positive growth and change. Others also work hard but need to embrace the new direction the school is taking so that all have ownership in the process and, as one team, can share in the school's successes.

Provide professional development to all staff in instructional techniques and methods of assessment to address the diversity of learners that are found here. Use members on your faculty who are already well versed in these techniques and methods and, by so doing, you will have consultants in place as questions on practice arise.

Some students lack motivation and are presenting challenges to the smooth workings of the school. Involve your students in the decision making process at the school and classroom levels. Give them leadership roles and additional responsibility so that they develop these skills. These activities will provide them with a sense of ownership in their learning process.

Continue and expand the "Writing across the Curriculum" initiative but incorporate reading and problem solving across the curriculum as well. These areas cannot be relegated to just English Language Arts and Mathematics courses and teachers. It is with this unified effort that you will see the greatest improvements in student learning.

Our recommendations are soundly based on what we have observed during our short visit to your school. They are not designed to simply replace current practices but to augment the good things that you are now doing. You have much to be commended for. You can be particularly proud of the sincere efforts you are making to secure a better learning and teaching environment. Please discuss our recommendations openly and with great candor. Continue on the road that you are traveling, but not with blinders. You have a school that is to be highly commended for the major steps undertaken and, with the present leadership, you can only continue to get better.

Summary

The findings of the school visit have a strong claim to legitimacy when the school visit is regarded as a research methodology and when it is conducted with the rigor that is consistent with that methodology.

That claim is based on the following points:⁶

The visit methodology has been carefully designed to ensure rigor. The design utilized research about two well established traditions of school visits, built a visit protocol as an instrument of modern accountability, and piloted it in over a hundred visits.

The visit meets the basic definitions for a research methodology.

The generation of legitimate knowledge is central to the purpose of the visit and to the principles for conducting a visit. The visit corner stones and principles make the methodology explicit to the chair and team to assure the visit is conducted with rigor.

The visit team's findings have an obvious legitimacy for the members of the school community, other educators and the public at large.

The legitimate knowledge generated by a visit makes it possible to design more effective systems of school accountability.

General acceptance of the legitimacy of visit findings faces some tough going. People who understand how the visit findings were derived seldom question their legitimacy. The strong belief that only scores on standardized tests and the methodologies closely associated with them can generate "real" findings about how well our schools are doing is usually the basis for dismissing a visit's findings.⁷ It quickly becomes more an argument about the nature of knowledge and reality (with all its passion and trimmings) than one about how to design accountability systems so that they will meet their objective of school improvement.

Having addressed the problem of legitimacy, we now turn our full attention to what Practice-Based Accountability is.

⁶ Four documents present these arguments in much greater detail. The study of the visit methodology of traditional English school inspection is presented in *Reaching for a Better Standard, English School Inspections and the Dilemmas of American School Accountability* (New York, 1996). The study of American accreditation is presented in *Visiting Accreditation: Strengthening the Regional Accreditation Process*, (LAB at Brown, 1999). Corner stones of the school visit were first described in *The Foundations of the Catalpa School Visit*, (Catalpa 1999). The principles for conducting the visit and great detail on how to assure the visit's rigor in how it is conducted are present in *The Handbook for Chairs of the SALT School Visit*, (Catalpa Ltd. and RIDE, 2000). Finally, a much more complete description of the both the design elements and effectiveness of the SALT and CPS/NEASC accountability systems is in preparation in the manuscript, *Reaching for a Better Standard in American School Accountability*.

⁷ Nicholas Lehman gives a provocative explanation for the power of this belief in his major work on the history of American testing, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.

PRACTICE-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY

The four defining elements of Practice-Based Accountability are:

The first concern of Practice-Based Accountability is how teaching and learning actually take place (or don't take place) in a classroom or a school. The focus is on what students and teachers actually do. It is on understanding the particularity of classrooms and schools, not on determining the presence (or absence) of generalized theories or trends in a classroom or school.

Practice-Based Accountability is about results. The results that matter are what students know and are able to do.

Practice-Based Accountability asserts that practitioners have the skills and knowledge to generate legitimate practice-based evidence about how well teaching and learning take place.

Practice-Based Accountability affirms and uses practitioner judgment as an important catalyst for generating knowledge and supporting the improvement of practice.

The potential benefits of Practice-Based Accountability include:

By shifting the focus of accountability so that it directly relates to what teachers and schools actually do, we increase its potential to change practice.

By recognizing the importance of practitioner work and judgment, it is possible for practitioners to become more accountable for what they are paid to do.

By strengthening the relationship between school support and school accountability, the potential effectiveness greatly increases for both accountability and support systems.

By establishing the legitimacy of practitioner knowledge, it is possible to build clearer and more useful definitions for a range of ideas and activities that have been important for American public schools, including standards, equity, good teaching practice, the nature of constructive information, professional development, program evaluation, and policy development. It even changes the definition of who a teacher is and what he does.

Practice-Based Accountability does not begin by focusing on what practitioners **should do**, but by focusing on what they **actually do** in their schools and classrooms on a daily basis. Practice-Based Accountability assumes that what happens and what doesn't happen in the interaction between adult and student in the classroom is what makes the difference between good and poor performance by both

students and the school. Practice-Based Accountability posits that an important key to what a practitioner actually does is what that practitioner actually knows and intends. Finally, it assumes that teaching and leadership of a school are evidence-based enterprises.

To say teaching is an evidence-based practice does not mean that teaching can be best understood by collecting evidence, as data, to test the variables that influence it. It means that teaching is usefully described by evidence of the specific events, judgments, and behavior that make up what happens in a classroom on a daily basis. Much of this evidence is particular to the ongoing three-way interaction between a teacher, her student(s), and the subject matter. Redefined in this way, a teacher is a practitioner who on a daily basis selects the details of her practice from an immense array of particulars, rather than someone who shapes her practice to comply with procedures, policies and generalized hypotheses. A teacher's actual experience and her deliberation on her past successes and failures are, of course, a critical piece of the body of evidence that she uses.

While practitioner knowledge rests in actual classroom activities, it is critical knowledge to have a definition of that knowledge if one is to understand how a school performs, as an institution of learning. Knowledge of this particular set of evidence provides a much different basis for making professional judgments about how well a school, a teacher, or even a student is performing. It is also the most useful knowledge for constructing what the individual practitioner and the school, as an institution, can best do to improve their performance.

Because accountability is concerned ultimately with results, and the relevant results are student learning, the connection between knowledge about practice and knowledge of learning results is key.

Teaching (and school administration) is a practice-based profession. Its progress is best measured by evidence about what teachers actually do when they teach and what learning results from what they do. Consistent with other practice-based professions, the ability of practitioners to generate evidence, consider patterns in the evidence, and change their practice in order to produce better results is central to improving both practice and the ability of practitioners to be held accountable for what they do and know.

NEXT STEPS

RIDE and CPS/NEASC are considering the following issues as they consider how to advance this work.

Practitioner evidence. A critical assumption is that Practice-Based Accountability is evidence-based. This evidence does not exist in defined data points in a survey or a testing instrument, but in the actual life of classrooms. This is a different, and thus quite difficult, notion for American educators, who have deliberately overlooked what actually happens in classrooms in favor of what standardized tests show about student performance, to understand. The English have a better grasp of this type of evidence. The tradition of English inspection makes different assumptions about what evidence about practice is—i.e., that it is possible to see it in an actual classroom and make sense out of it.

Learning about learning. American teachers at first find it considerably difficult to reach conclusions about what students do and, particularly, how to judge how well they are learning. They are engulfed by the overwhelming legitimacy ascribed to standardized test results, which have become established as the only true criterion for learning. The SALT teams are making great progress in finding ways to look at student learning and to make judgments about its quality. But there is much work ahead.

School self-study and action planning. Rhode Island's SALT and CPSS/NEASC's new accreditation process both hold that the ultimate success of their accountability systems is what happens inside the schools. Both agencies see self-study and internal school improvement planning as critical processes to the success of their work. Both have embarked on interesting approaches to self-study and planning that emphasize reflection, professional dialogue and critical thinking within the schools in place of marching through the steps of a planning exercise.

System feedback and evaluation. Both CPSS/NEASC and RIDE have conducted some initial exercises to evaluate their efforts. The different assumptions behind practitioner accountability make new demands on how to conduct useful and accurate evaluations of these initiatives.

IN CONCLUSION

The last six years of work by CPSS/NEASC and RIDE's SALT demonstrates a productive way to unite accountability and school improvement into one coherent system. Accountability and support have been separated because of the limitations that are part of the methodologies for judging school performance that have been available. By seriously addressing the questions of how to build legitimate findings from a methodology that is based on teacher knowledge and judgment, this work has effectively tied accountability to school improvement, thus strengthening both.

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