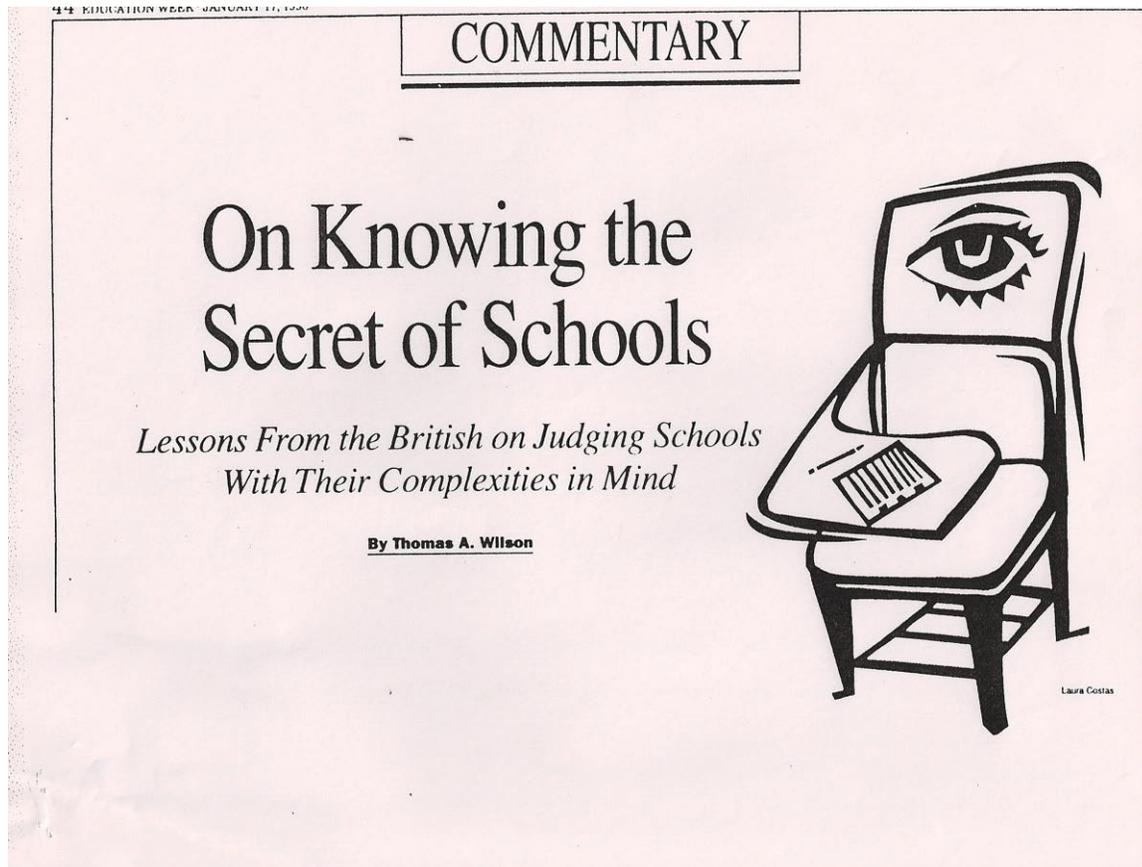


January 17, 1996



We dance round in a ring and suppose,  
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

--Robert Frost, "The Secret Sits"

The American way of knowing schools, particularly when there are questions about accountability, skillfully avoids what is actually happening in the classroom.

Classrooms are the prime workplaces for the adults we pay to educate our children. We avoid the real life complexities of teaching and learning, when we take refuge in measuring student performance.

The national consensus that our schools must improve and that our youth must learn more has put tremendous pressure on our accountability system to tell us how we are doing and what we can do better. Our system does poorly at both. Its inadequacies are more often passed on to schools and teachers, rather than confronted. Since it is not based on knowing and improving actual teaching and learning, it cannot contribute much to our discussion about how to improve the practice of teaching and learning. Our methodology for knowing and relating to schools focuses on measures that relate only indirectly to these matters of importance.

These conclusions about American school accountability come from my last three years of watching and writing about English School Inspection. This 155-year-old tradition of knowing and judging school quality has been Britain's primary method of school accountability.

Inspection focuses first on the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. How does its methodology allow that? An English inspector revealed the key: "We must know what we see, not see what we know." While this may at first sound like a riddle, it is at the

heart of the inspection method. This idea about school knowledge profoundly challenges how Americans go about knowing and judging schools.

An inspector believes that knowledge about schools can be useful and legitimate only when it is based on visiting a school to see what is actually happening there. That is how an inspector comes to know the quality of teaching and learning in a particular school and how that quality relates to the way that school functions as a unique and complex human organization. If the inspector wants to learn about another school, she must visit it. By figuring out the secret in the middle of the school, she comes to know what she sees. English inspectors believe that it is this knowledge that informs good policy making, good intervention and good professional development.

With his focus and purpose clear, the inspector seeks to generate knowledge that is useful and legitimate. He draws from the rich and interesting methodology of inspection that has evolved over 155 years.

Inspectors are convinced that school knowledge is best generated by those who have had substantial teaching experience. Actual teaching experience is an important base for knowing when teaching and learning are going well and when they are not. Inspection relies on human judgment, in particular the professional judgment of

skilled practitioners. It does not attempt to hold human judgment at bay in the name of objectivity.

To sketch further what inspection is and how it differs from American accountability practice, consider the following questions with the answers from the inspection and American methodologies juxtaposed.

- **What is most important to know?**

*Inspection:* The quality of the particular events that make up the process of teaching and learning in the actual classroom is always the first focus. That quality is always seen in the context of the particular school. Teaching and learning are viewed as two sides of the same phenomena, not as separate ones.

*American:* The impact of education (or often some defined component of education) on student performance is what counts. An objective analysis of these results (usually standardized tests) is the basis for judging school and teacher quality.

- **How is information collected and how is sense made of it?**

*Inspection:* Teaching and learning are best understood when they are seen as actual, complex events that happen in a particular school. It is critical to see the school as the context for what is happening in its

classrooms. Thus, an inspector must go to the school and learn about it from "being there." Inspectors spend 65% of their time watching actual classes in session, often visiting as a team for as long as a week. They do their analysis and write their basic conclusions before they leave the school. They believe that, if they know the school, their report will be legitimate, that it will make sense and that it will contribute to the improvement of that school, regardless of the level of the school's performance.

*American.* Using objective instruments, we collect data from the people in a school about a specified research or evaluation topic. Testing student performance is the most legitimate instrument. Sometimes research field workers, or even teachers, are sent to the school to collect descriptive data, but only after they have been trained in how to be objective. Their analysis serves to elucidate defined factors that influence the results. Sometimes an analysis is comparative, comparing one school (or other entity) with another. Most often the conclusions from the data are drawn in offices miles away from the school site where the data has been collected.

- **How is it decided if what is going on in a school is good or not?**

*Inspection:* Most of England's 3,000 inspectors are seasoned teachers. They believe that a simple description of what goes on in a school is never enough. Professional judgments about the quality of what they see is at the heart of their method. Judgment links information to possible action. Judgments about school quality are "moderated" through intense discussion with other inspection team members, who are at the school at the same time. The notion of standardizing criteria for observation or filling in the blanks on a list contradicts the traditional tenets of professional judgment.

*American:* American practice traditionally has tried to remove from the analysis the very human judgment that is at the heart of the English method. A key procedure for insuring objectivity is to make standards, criteria and judgment points as explicit and specific as possible before the data is collected.

- **How does what is learned make a difference to a school?**

*Inspection:* The traditional inspector wants the knowledge he generates to make a positive difference for the children at the school. "At the end of the day our job is to see that the school gives English children a good deal." The motto of the national

inspectors is "Do good as you go." While an inspection team will carefully consider how to construct what they say so it will have a positive impact on what happens in the school, inspectors do not believe their reports must always be positive. Positive action to improve a school is often spurred by negative conclusions. While the inspection team will labor over the report, inspectors and school people view the inspection visit itself as having the most important impact on a school. This is because of the special way the inspection team participates in the life of the school. As experienced professionals, the inspectors engage school people at all levels for a sustained period of time, questioning how well are they doing and why. The team provides the school with a formal "reporting-back" session that summarizes its most important judgments about the quality of the school. The school cannot avoid that discussion about quality. That discussion has weight because it is local and particular to each school. Follow-up is not emphasized.

*American:* Since American findings about a school are disassociated from that school, effectively introducing them into the school is a major problem. American have invented an array of technical assistance strategies to disseminate knowledge back to schools. The American view of school knowledge supports the favored approach

of designing pilot projects for intervening in schools to introduce change.

Inspection is not a perfect, tested system that Americans should adopt as the new silver-bullet for school accountability. The notion of adopting programs and policies that are disconnected from their surrounding circumstances is foreign to the basic assumptions of inspection. It will be much more productive to consider how inspection challenges some of our assumptions about how we now know and judge schools. Such an examination could lead to a productive reconstruction of American school accountability.

For example, our thinking has been greatly constrained by the importance we have placed on objectivity. Without questioning its value, or even its meaning, we have made objectivity a prerequisite for how we know and judge schools. By using this as our rationale, we often begin our discussions about accountability with concern about the assessment methods, rather than about the content and nature of the knowledge we need.

By making the research methods our first priority, which is contrary to a true scientific approach, we highlight what the researcher knows, not what the

practitioner knows. Common sense should tell us that what the practitioner knows about teaching and learning is what shapes actual practice in schools. Finding methodologies that understand and seek to sharpen practitioner knowledge is key to a useful approach to accountability that supports improvement.

When we consider method before purpose we mix up what is complex and worthy of attention with what is simple. Inspectors believe their inquiry should unravel the complexities of real schools. That is where the secret sits. By concentrating on the complexity of the research method, the American approach would like the secret to rest in the findings of the study. It wants school life to be simple. It is as if we want to learn more about how to do the research than about how to make the practice of teaching and learning better.

Accountability depends on the quality and content of the knowledge available to support good decisions about school performance and improvement. Inspection shows that, if we can give up some of our traditional beliefs about what makes knowledge rigorous and useful, we might be able to invent more promising ways to know the real secrets of schools. Knowledge about each particular school, rather than research about the factors that effect schooling or the evaluation of pilot programs, will make it possible to improve

schools in the sensible and continuous manner that a stable democracy requires. While research and evaluation can help improve schools, knowledge about particular schools is what will drive productive reform.