You get what you came for? A Case Study and Reflections on Applying an English Inspection Model in International Schooling.

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Abstract This article considers the position of international education, and the ways in which it 'borrows' performativity structures from the English education system. Utilising a recent Case Study and analysing Ralph Tabberer's personal reflections on it, the article outlines ways in which we can continue to learn from the socio-cultural dimensions of the English schooling system that are regularly utilised in an international educational context.

Keywords: International Education; Inspection; Leadership; Performativity; Transnational Education.

INTRODUCTION

International education is hugely diverse, from no cost and low cost schools through to the international elite schools that are an overseas reflection of the English independent sector. This article traces some of the recent developments around inspection in international education, both abroad and here at home, and discusses the uses of performativity (Ball, 2003) both inside the English system, and beyond. The article examines a Case Study in an international school context, and reflects on the personal experiences of reviewing a school from a different culture. It draws on the school review, the observations that came from the review process, and the wider use of English originated education systems in an international education context.

The world of education leadership is a rapidly changing one: the demands from national governments upon schools, colleges and other education organisations to 'raise standards' is ever present. National governments though, feel the pressure from supra-national Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) compiling league tables, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data. Talk of school leadership has become highly significant in the context of current education policy developments. Discourses in England, as in many parts of the world, have centred on leadership (Barber, 2007) and elements of the English highly performance-based system are regularly copied and emulated (Green, 2013).

THE ENGLISH LEGACY?

The development of leadership inside England's educational institutions, and the leaders' place in bringing in 'change' and 'improvement' in education, is well recognised and documented (Gunter, 2012; Bush and Glover, 2012). School leaders now encompass a wider range of roles in educational centres, as there has been an expansion in the numbers of people involved and the variety of roles that they undertake. This is particularly true of the changes in educational markets that have been created since the 1988 Education Reform Act, but arguably intensified from 1997, when at least one act of legislation on education was passed every year until 2010 (Outhwaite, 2011). This created another leadership layer that has been added to yet again with the significant educational changes that have been witnessed between 2010 and 2014. As Davies (1990) noted, the 1998 Education Reform Act introduced 'a new era' for educational reform and the processes of change, de-construction and re-construction of the forms of schooling have been constant, and contested, ever since (Chitty, 2009).

For example, an apparent crisis of A-Level qualifications took place between 2002 and 2014. Successive Secretaries of State for Education attempted to deal with this in a number of ways. Most recently, these have included 'raising standards' by including the curriculum changes that started from September 2015, including: the (re)introduction of numerical, 9-1, grading (as opposed to alphabetical, A*-G) for public secondary examinations at 16; the reduction in opportunities to re-sit exams at 16, 17 and 18; the (re)introduction of linear exams for A-Level; the return to more traditional curricula content; and substantial reduction in coursework percentages (DfE, 2016). The independent sector have voted with their feet through these crises, with many centres opting instead for the consistency and the international recognition of the International Baccalaureate's Diploma Programme as opposed to A-Levels, and indeed, many have adopted the same approach for GCSEs, by choosing international GCSEs (iGCSEs). International schools are choosing international curriculum modes to ease the change and movement of students, often globally, around the education sector.

TRANSNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE?

Sociologists have long commented on the structures in education. Margaret Archer's renowned writings (2013) on the social origins of educational systems are one such exemplar:

> to understand educational interaction means grasping how structural factors shape action situations and why in turn these are interpreted in particular ways by the people involved. To explain educational change means theorizing about these joint determinants of interaction at their point of intersection. (Archer, 2013, p.89)

This relates precisely to the space in the education system where school Reviews and Inspections are conducted and what the aims and intentions of these are. All national systems have particular determinants that characterise them, but recently theorists have begun to grapple with the concept of transnational knowledge (Gunter *et al*, 2014) and how we are 'sharing' the common elements of a performativity based system inside a global neo-liberal system that is now very much in existence (Ball, 2012).

Research conducted by Doherty *et al*. (2009) in Australia showed that the choices that students take are often to gain access to Higher Education (HE) and global mobility opportunities, even if they originally came from the native community, or if they were not wealthy in comparison to their peers. Inside both a late capitalist system and a neo-liberal system that follows the supply of capital (Piketty,

2013), clearly the greater opportunities for scholarships at global universities come in to play, through having access to routes into other countries' Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), that are unavailable (at a similar level of cost) within their own nation state. This is echoed in the more recent research on university significance, in 'the tale of two campuses' from the Great British Class Survey (GBCS) data by Savage *et al.* (2015, p.219).

Groups of students have become mobile either because their parents are transnational for work, or because their parents have deliberately become geographically mobile for better opportunities for their children's education, as detailed by Doherty *et al*. (2009). Such groups experience a need for specialisation or special treatment and for 'differentiation' from competing groups, as Archer comments:

> Weak differentiation and specialisation will be experienced as major deficiencies in the services received by a number of social groups. The uniform and standardised nature of schooling means that many do not get the type of service they require. Despite differences in aspirations and aptitudes parents and pupils confront a system which provides them with relatively little choice or a forced selection between a prestige mainstream and inferior branching alternatives. Other groups will suffer because specialisation hardly begins to meet their needs… many groups in different parts of the social structure will find themselves experiencing severe deficiencies and among them may number the elites of certain institutions. (Archer, 2013, p.255)

The 'deficiencies' to which Archer refers regarding elite groups accessing education, are based on the industrial model of schooling (Marshak, 2003); schooling on a mass scale does not suit their viewpoint or expectations. It is, as Bourdieu described, almost 'prereflexive' (knowing where the ball is going to land in a tennis match); small public schools suit elite transnational mobile groups that are wealthy because of the process of the international schooling opportunity it affords them to cement their global communities (Khan, 2011).

What type of school parents' choose to send their children to, depends on what is available and affordable, and whether or not the student, parents, and staff involved in the choices are aware of all the different factors that come in to play (Archer, 2013). Choice of school creates types of access to the next layer of education and it is this stratification that teachers, leaders and owners of education systems (whether these are charities, governments or businesses) collude in on a daily basis, consciously or unconsciously. Choosing the 'appropriate' secondary school has long-term implications of transition that can go well beyond the access that it enables to subsequent higher levels of education.

EDUCATION, LEADERSHIP AND CHANGE

Tensions between agency and structure are often discussed in educational change and state formation and re-formation (Green, 2013). The tensions have very well-developed roots in previous literature on organisational theory and educational structures (Archer, 2013), often demonstrating that the context of school leadership has been neglected in this area, particularly concerning the isolation of school leaders created by the internal and external pressures that they face (Townsend, 2015).

Gunter's (2012) work on Knowledge Production in Education Leadership (KPEL), the development of 'professional capital' as analysed by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), and the adoption (both pre- and post- the 2010 UK General Election) of what Ball (2012) refers to as 'Global Education Inc.' are part of

the picture of the changing education system inside an English context. But education leadership is further developed by the networks that are established as the systems that affect our day-to-day existence in the education sector are developed and mutate (Kadushin, 2012; Townsend, 2015).

It is argued that a new paradigm has evolved in educational leadership by those who are prepared to take risks with their leadership. This risk-taking is varied depending on the socio-political and socio-economic context that these leaders (all variously defined: heads, principals, executive heads, CEOs, and so on) find themselves in (Earley, 2013). Ironically, one of the noticeable factors of the English independent sector is that the teachers have often been the head master or mistress, rather than any other term, even though it is their sector that is often running the biggest 'company' formats. These independent schools are mostly registered charities inside the UK though – not private companies – something that the last Labour government began to tackle with co-operation agreements being encouraged (Ball *et al.*, 2012) to enable links between private and state provision.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSNATIONAL LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES

Many criticisms have been made of the current neo-liberal political context. Gunter (2012) has particularly highlighted how the leadership rhetoric has become dominant and homogenised, rather than pluralistic and divergent. The arguments are between the democratic versus the bureaucratic elements of the education system, and the elitist versus the egalitarian areas of the system as highlighted in the Compass Report (2015). Systems leadership itself, playing out through the education system under the instruction of both the DfE and the NCTL is very evident (Seddon, 2008; Gunter, 2012). With the creation of the independent National Leadership Foundation (2016) the government direction of policy travel is very much towards increased school-to-school support being delivered within a marketised system (Senge *et al*., 2014).

These various neo-liberal models of performativity (Ball, 2003) are now rolling out across the globe as international schools often use the English curriculum and, therefore, can adopt and adapt which measures are suited to their environment. The following Case Study looks into an exemplar of how schools are expected to be accountable for all of their development: day-to-day teaching; results; leadership; and on-going parental and community relationships.

This Case Study and the reflections that follow, both evidence and exemplify how such a range of homogenised leadership factors can (or cannot) be played out inside an international educational context, depending on the extent to which they are deployed, and the level of thought that is enacted. The voice is that of the second author, Ralph Tabberer; the Case Study and the reflections given are, themselves, an example of structure versus agency.

CASE STUDY

It was the first evening after a day's work on an International School review. The review team was providing feedback to the local Principal and the exchange was not going well. Inspectors will tell you about 'first-night blues': that feeling that after Day One of many an inspection, when you tend to feel overwhelmed by the problems you have found, rather than the positives and highlights. Anyway, this first-day feedback session was going badly. Clearly, the Principal did not feel that the review team were making the right judgments. On the team's side, their leader could not understand why the Principal was hearing the challenges but not the good points he also tried to work into the feedback.

I was not at the meeting myself, but I had arranged the review visit to meet the needs of the school owners, and I had recruited this review team. I felt a great responsibility for getting the interaction right. In particular, I had helped to design the review criteria and framework, and had borrowed quite heavily from a local inspection framework in order to arrive at classroom grades that would be quite familiar to the school.

After the awkward feedback session, both sides called me, trying to find solace or reassurance. I listened to both and the real insights came from listening to my review leader as he gave his account of what had happened. I simply asked him to describe exactly what he had found during Day One. He relayed many points and he told me how he organised the feedback accordingly. What grabbed me, as I listened, were the polarities in the team leader's message. The students were 'exceptional' and he had never met such an 'empowered group'. But despite that, he judged that the teaching was not challenging enough.

Personal Reflections on the Case Study

I have worked for ten years of my educational career as a researcher and I find polarities fascinating. After all, strong polarities in the evidence base are quite unusual. Most of the time, we find patterns of evidence that broadly point in one direction or another. It is always harder, as a researcher, to explain a phenomenon where there are, say, strong positives and strong negatives. I enjoy it when there are polarities in the evidence base. It is usually a signal that I am about to learn something new.

As the review leader relayed his account of events, he explained he had determined to present the positives first, and then the weaknesses. Of course, those Principals who are used to inspection know this approach all too well and they sit waiting for the 'but...'. In this case, the pervading negatives were quite distinctive, so they drowned out the good news. The narrative leaned to the negative. It is important to see every school inspection or school review as a socio-cultural event. Inspection is usually concerned with applying a common template that is designed to apply to many schools, to a single school. A review is not always sensitive to context.

Inspections expect to find minor polarities, not major ones. And they usually find a narrative that downplays the polarities. For example, the story can become that the school is basically weak but the student intake is strong, and it is this innate strength that somehow saves the school from poor results. I felt that we were in danger of treating our review as an inspection, so I asked both sides to give the process more time. And I asked the review leader to *focus* on the polarities. I also gave him permission to do one thing you can never allow an inspector to do: I told him it was fine if he needed to change the review criteria and templates, *if they were the problem* rather than the school. This freedom changed the whole process and the review results.

In truth, the team leader did not change every detail and finding but he did begin to look for the reasons behind the polarities: what was the school doing so well in one area while another area needed work? And, because the school was an Arab international school in the Middle East, this shift in approach and mind-set allowed the review team of mostly Western educators to find and understand strengths that they never knew existed. They discovered that the route to empowering students 'exceptionally' – for that is how they judged the practice in the school – involved many actions on the part of the school. The teachers and school leaders *loved* their students, and they showed that love. They knew them as individuals and they knew their families very well. That involved finding ways to have regular interaction with the families.

The teachers made every attempt to avoid being judgmental about the students and, even when the students could not understand something, they found another way to approach the challenge of

explaining it. Crucially, the teachers convinced the students that they were absolutely devoted to them, they respected them, they wanted them to succeed and they would be on their side, whatever the provocation. From that starting point, the teachers offered activities to the students as opportunities and choices. In return, students began to give the school their loyalty. The combination of all these psychological influences, consistently and repeatedly applied, left students feeling empowered. Even if the class teaching could have been technically improved.

I was struck by some simple messages.

Change the purpose, change the story

This Case Study demonstrates one old and well-known principle, which is that if you change the purpose and frame of reference for an exercise – in this case, choosing to review rather than inspect – you change the result; and you change the narrative. Once the review leader had permission to stand back and question our agreed method, he opened up the possibility that the review team could discover something they had not previously known. Too many inspections position experts as the observers and judges of practitioners, supposedly objectively; they rarely allow for the inspection team to learn something about education that it did not already know.

Adopt the framework, condition the response

This Case Study also showed me that even a minor decision about tools, criteria or frameworks can have a major influence on the outcome. In this example, we used a classroom evaluation framework that was inspection-like. Its impact on the review team was to condition their end-of-day response. It felt as if the outsiders were primed to give inspection, not review, feedback. In the modern era, teams of educators get together sometimes as inspectors, sometimes as accreditation teams and sometimes as reviewers. They carry the habits they learn from one approach into another *unless they are (de-) programmed to change them*.

Reflection Conclusions

In schools, there is scope for many forms of institutional evaluation including self-evaluation, inspection, review and accreditation visits. This Case Study illustrates how easy it is to arrive at different results based on variations in the purpose of the exercise, the team deployed, and the tools and criteria selected. The traditions of scientific research strongly point us to the importance of asking, 'if we had changed something in the process, would we have changed the outcome?'. In this instance, the answer is clear, strong and affirmative.

Consequently, it is crucial that we treat the outcomes of different institutional evaluations not as 'truths' but as varied and partial interpretations of the evidence base. And the evidence base is itself a construct: it is partial and incomplete. Some may feel that this finding helps to invalidate inspection, or any other form of external review, but I prefer to see this as vindication for schools who want to adopt *more than one* approach. In my experience, deeper knowledge tends to come from understanding alternative perspectives.

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS AND LEADERSHIP

The importance of effective leadership and management of schools has increased in significance and, as such, there has been much research conducted into the effectiveness of school leadership and its associated impact on school improvement (Barber, 2007). Bush (2015) has also commented that England is the only country in the world to have introduced a mandatory National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) and then dispensed with it again.

Bush argues that there are three dimensions of leadership that assist in defining its concept: influence, values, and vision (Bush, 2011, p.5). Most leaders work towards influencing individuals or groups in order to achieve a desired outcome. The concept of values, however, characterises a leader's self-awareness and personal values together with their moral and emotional capability. It is these characteristics that a leader is required to communicate effectively in order to represent the ethos of their school. Leithwood *et al.* (1999) analysed literature based on leadership and management, and identified six models of management: formal, collegial, political, subjective, ambiguity, and cultural. Bush and Glover (2002) identified nine leadership models: managerial, participative, transformational, interpersonal, transactional, post-modern, contingency, moral, and instructional.

In this Case Study, the perceived strength of the school's leadership was hugely influenced by the context, perspective and processes of the external review. It nearly missed the very strong values systems that pervaded the school, simply because the review team were misled into adopting a performativity approach rather than a more open or questioning approach.

CONCLUSIONS

Whilst theories and models of leadership and management are well established, the emergence of Distributed Leadership in more recent years has removed the idea of leadership being the sole responsibility of one leader and instead recognises the influence of various sources of power and leadership capability (Harris 2010; Torrance, 2013). It is clear (as is reported in the Case Study) that leaders can feel trapped, and responsible, in modern school systems. This is because too often, too little is done to appreciate the wider socio-cultural backdrop of their context.

Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) ideas of extending professional capital, in schools, where teachers and leaders are allowed to develop their own reflexive ability to change and adapt, suddenly appears an even stronger option. And not solely because teachers want and need to engage in a profession that they are leading and developing themselves. It is also because it proves very difficult to judge a school fairly without opening up to its special characteristics ad context. Clearly, being open to possibilities is easier to do, on an institutional level, in a review than it is in an inspection process.

With regard to both the Case Study and the reflections considered within this article, most leaders in the international school system have a degree of flexibility that is unavailable inside the current English system, from which we can continue to learn about the socio-cultural considerations inside our own educational contexts.

This ability to flex, and put our agency into motion, is an area that is impossible often during inspection, as regimes and timetables have to be kept to, in order to standardise a system effectively. But what we have discussed here begs the question: how much do we miss in English-style inspection through the lack of ability to alter structures appropriately? Conformity is fine perhaps, if it serves a purpose in ensuring some students are not disadvantaged – and compliance is required on issues such as safeguarding – but standardising all systems so that we turn differing education systems into

identikit models reduces the value of national cultures, personal inputs, and ultimately the differences from which we are all able to learn.

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