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**School Reform through Examinations:  
Lessons from the British Experience**

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**NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WRITING**

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# School Reform through Examinations: Lessons from the British Experience

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Warren Simmons and Lauren Resnick (1993) present a wonderful vision for U.S. schools in the twenty-first century. They imagine schools in which students have "worked on extended projects, discussed complex problems, and generally thought their way through a demanding curriculum aimed at the kinds of knowledge and skills they will need as citizens and workers of the future." Significantly, Simmons and Resnick envision "the same high expectations ... applied to poor, minority, and immigrant children as to the children in upscale suburban schools ... teachers [who] were trusted professionals... [with] access to high-quality continuing professional development" (p. 11). If we can implement their vision for education, we indeed will produce a well-educated populace, ready to lead our country into the next century.

The question is how best to achieve this vision. Consistent with the current federal agenda, Simmons and Resnick suggest one approach, the creations of "world-class content and performance standards, a performance based examination system that embodies those standards, together with rubrics and procedures for scoring students' work reliably and fairly" (p. 12). *American 2000 (1991)*, the blueprint for educational reform produced by the National Governor's Association and spearheaded by then Governor Clinton, calls for voluntary, national, high-stakes, achievement examinations in core subject areas, for grades 4, 8, and 12, with scores eventually given to potential employers or used for college admission. High national standards and goals would be attached to the tests (see also Cheney, 1991; National Council on Education Standards and Testing, 1992; Simmons & Resnick, 1993; Tucker, 1992). Simmons and Resnick explain, "Our goal is to build a revitalized education system using assessment as a tool for transforming instruction and learning." Marc Tucker explains the argument for reform through exams succinctly: "If as some thoughtful people have suggested recently, our schools are actually test-preparation organizations, then the current movement toward national standards and examinations may turn out to be the most powerful reform strategy we have" (p. 21). If Tucker's claim is true, that our schools are "test-preparation organizations," I contend that that needs to be reformed. In the rest of this article, I will present evidence that suggests that a system of high-stakes examinations, even well-designed performance-based examinations, presents a flawed foundation on which to build a national educational reform movement. In fact, my evidence suggests that high stakes exams have the potential to move us away from rather than towards the end point **we** all want to achieve. I will further argue that a stronger foundation for educational reform will likely come through working with teachers and school administrators to rethink and then reshape the curriculum as well as the organization of the school, with testing following from, not leading the reform effort.

I have come to these conclusions through detailed observations of British secondary schools, where high stakes national examinations attached to high standards for teaching

and learning have been in place since the beginning of this century (Freedman, 1994). A look at the British system is particularly pertinent because as Madaus and Kellaghan (1991) point out, "The proposed American reforms seem to have been inspired by, if not actually modeled on, the British [examination] system" (p. 77). Although one can never directly transport findings from one cultural context to another, it is possible to learn from others' experiences. Focusing on just one area of the curriculum, English language and literature, I will describe the British examinations and their effects on what and how students learn.

My observations involved a national questionnaire study of 695 teachers across grade levels and 702 of their students at the secondary level in both the United States and Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales) as well as observations in eight English/ language arts classrooms in the two countries, four in the United States and four in Britain, across the equivalent of grades 6-9. The teachers who completed questionnaires and the teachers of the eight case study classes were selected to represent the most thoughtful current practice in their respective countries. The case study classes were paired, one in England and one in the U.S., and the students in the paired classes exchanged their writing with one another for an entire academic year. For the writing exchanges, the two teachers in each pair coordinated their curricula, so that students were doing roughly the same kinds of writing at the same time; although students sent personal letters back and forth, the main focus of the exchange was on major and substantive pieces of writing autobiographies, books about school and community life, opinion essays, essays about literature. Research teams in both countries observed the classrooms and interviewed students and teachers about the ongoing instructional process. Two of the four British classrooms that I studied intensively were ninth-grade equivalent and were in the first year of the two year examination course for English language and English literature.

In Britain, during the equivalent of grades nine and ten, the entire curriculum for those two years in every subject consists of an examination syllabus that prepares students for the General Certificate of Secondary Education or the GCSE. Students normally are taught by the same teacher for both years of an examination course. They usually take GCSE exams in six or more different examination subjects (for example, besides English language and literature, they take subjects such as mathematics, geography, drama, Spanish, French, Russian, physics, chemistry, biology, and so on). These exams determine their future. Those with good results (about 30% of the test takers) continue in school to prepare for university or other post-secondary education, or leave with a fair chance of employment. Those with poor results generally leave school. Unless they are enrolled in a specific vocational program, students who continue in school take an additional two year examination course to prepare them to take yet another set of exams, the A levels, which determine university admissions. Only about 20% of these, or something less than 6% of the nation's 18-year-olds, actually complete the A level course and take the examinations (*Statistics of Schools*, 1988, p. 133).

In 1987-88, when the writing exchanges were ongoing, the British national examinations were in every way what we in the United States are striving for in our most ideal examination system. It is important to note that the British exams have undergone a number of changes since then and their form remains in flux. In 1987, though, there was much excitement in England because the exam system had just been revised. Before that

time students were separated into two examination tracks: one for the university bound (O level) and the other for the non-university bound. Beginning in 1987, all students took the same course and exams, the GCSE. In addition, for the English language and literature examinations, schools were able to choose the option of coursework (a portfolio) as the only basis for evaluation. In each portfolio, the examining board required that at least one piece of writing be completed under "controlled" or testing conditions on an impromptu topic. But the rest was coursework, selected by student and teacher to represent the students' best efforts and to show a range of knowledge and skill. In exam portfolios that I collected, I found answers to questions about literature, imaginative writing related to literature, expository essays about literature, expository essays about current events, sometimes original fiction, sometimes autobiography, sometimes other personal writing. In every sense, this was what we in the United States call performance assessment.

With respect to scoring, completed portfolios first were graded by a committee of teachers at the student's school led by a teacher who coordinated school marking with standards set by a national board. Then the portfolios were sent to the national board to be spot checked for consistency with national standards. In cases where inconsistencies were detected, the portfolios were rescored. Every student portfolio was graded as a whole; no grades were given for individual pieces.

Before the coursework-only option, students had been evaluated solely by their performance on a "terminal examination" at the end of the two-year course. The "terminal examination" consisted of impromptu essay questions and writing prompts, given in a testing setting. In 1987, most British teachers were pleased with the direction that the GCSE examination was taking.

In spite of the new examination system, the results of my observations in British classrooms were depressing. Unlike the U.S. classrooms I studied and unlike the British classrooms for younger students who were not preparing for exams, the exam classrooms had to adhere to requirements that inhibited the teachers' abilities to build a coherent curriculum with their students and inhibited the amounts and kinds of writing the students did. The constraints of the examinations also colored the teachers' responses to their students' writing. Philippa Furlong, a teacher of one of the British exam classes, speaks poignantly:

I was geared by an examination. I'd forgotten how frustrating I actually found that ... because it was a nightmare that.... I think if they [my students] hadn't have had the restraints of an exam, they would have gone further. (Interview, November 2, 1990)

When I was first working with my British colleagues to plan the exchanges and with Philippa and Gillian Hargrove who taught the other British exam class, we all assumed that performance examinations that required a variety of types of writing would be entirely compatible with the goals of the writing exchange. We expected the teachers to merge writing for the exchange and writing for the examinations. However, the pressure of the examinations took over. The high stakes of the examiner audience and the teachers' and students' perceptions of the kind of writing that was appropriate for the exams constricted how and what students wrote. Philippa explained the inhibitions her students

felt when writing for the examiner:

The kids didn't feel that confident about really baring their souls in an assignment that was going to go off to an examiner even though they knew that I was one of the examiners. They knew that beyond me there was an unknown quantity. (Interview, April 20, 1989)

Philippa's students confirmed her assessment. Andi, like the other students we interviewed, claimed that the examiner caused her to censor her content because, according to Andi, "They [the examiners] are not people at all" (Interview, May, 1988). Andi reinforced the importance of these non-people: "When you are marking a GCSE paper, then it's your future which is serious" (Interview, May, 1988). Joshua described his vision of the examiner in action: "I have this picture of the examiner sitting down there reading them [the exam papers] and putting marks on them" (Interview, May, 1988). In the end Philippa's students decided that most exam writing was a kind of writing that was just for the examiner and would be of no interest to anyone beyond the examiner. They couldn't reconcile the examiner audience with any other audience, including the students in the U.S.

Across all eight classes involved in the writing exchanges, I found that students were most committed to their writing when they decided on what to write with their teacher. They were motivated through their own choice-making and by being part of a community working together. Students in the exam classes, unlike the two groups of younger British students who had no exams and unlike their U.S. partners, showed this kind of involvement only when they were not writing for the examiner, which was rarely.

When their students wrote for the exam audience, Gillian and Philippa inadvertently began to take away their students' responsibility over the subject matter for their writing. They acted contrary to their theory about how students learn to write, which includes having students assume responsibility as a key component. For example, for the exam pieces Gillian prepared specific topics for her students to address without class decision-making, something she otherwise did not do. The contrast between an assignment for the exchange and one for the examiner appear on the following handout for the class:

[For the Examiner]  
4th Year English  
Assignments for November 1987

Follow up to Basket Ball Game **TO BE READY BY NOV 17**

Choose one of these:

1. Allen and Rebecca meet up in 10 years, or 5 years time. Remember they won't be able to meet just anywhere. Maybe you can change the balance of power between the two of them and make them meet on Allen's territory.

What are they doing now? How do they remember that short summer of the Basket Ball Game? Does Rebecca feel guilty about cutting Allen? Does Allen feel hurt or angry? How do they feel about segregation? What about human rights? How have they changed and developed as people?

2. An alternative ending to the one in the book, or a further chapter. Maybe Allen rejects Rebecca, maybe the parents try to intervene and Allen and Rebecca try to resist them.

Whatever you choose, your new ending has to be consistent with the characters as they are in the book.

[For the Exchange] Autobiography **HAVE IT READY BY THURS. NOV 26**

This is to send to our colleagues in California.

These are the ideas we discussed: —

- a) Key events in your life/or major influential people
- b) An important year or few months when your life changed dramatically
- c) Selected highlights from your entire life
- d) Early memories—harder than it seems to get back to how you thought and felt

Gillian determines the focus for the writing on *The Basketball Game*, whereas for the autobiography she and the students "discussed" ideas to include.

Gillian's student Surge explains the pressure that the GCSE created for him during the exchange year:

Everything has to be perfect, and you get so much coursework ... It's just so confusing, you don't know what to do, and you get really frustrated sometimes, and like the teachers will either end up getting in arguments with the class or the class will end up getting in an argument with the teacher, but it's only because, I think what some teachers don't understand is that we get so much coursework, like from English, maths, history and all that, and it's got to be in on a certain date, and it's just hard to bring it all in at once. (Interview, June 9, 1988)

Besides the pressures of the high stakes and the heavy workload across all their subjects, the examination restricted the teachers in how they could help their students. By the time the 1994 exam syllabus was developed, the Northern Examinations and Assessment Board felt the need to be explicit about how much help the teacher may give when students submit coursework:

Advice remains on a general level, only becoming specific to exemplify general comments, and the onus is left on the candidate to incorporate the teacher's general advice by making specific alterations and thus submitting a final draft. This level of advice is acceptable whereas proof reading, where the teacher points out a detailed series of errors, omissions and amendments for the candidate to correct in the subsequent draft is inadmissible. (p. 5)

Such policies inhibited British teachers from the kind of explicit teaching needed to reach the most needy students. As Gillian notes, these requirements are especially problematic for teaching bilingual writers who may learn from specific corrections and pointing out a detailed series of errors. In this context, it is crucial to remember that the lower-scoring students make up some 65-70% of the students taking the British exams.

Gillian's student Leabow comments on contrasts in the classroom spirit when the class writes for the exchange versus the examiner. For the exchange Leabow shares her writing: "Sometimes we might nick [steal] ideas from each other." The sharing atmosphere of exchange writing contrasts with the GCSE writing. Leabow is in control when she writes for the exchange and constrained and rushed when she writes on //set topics" for the exam:

I would really like to write what I want to write, not get set assignments although ... that is the most important but I'd like to put some of my own stuff and have my own time to do it and not be rushed. (Interview, June 9, 1988)

Gillian's students claim that the exchange audience would have helped with their exam writing. For Surge, writing in school and not for the exchange, has only one value; it "may help you out in your GCSE." By contrast, the exchange audience is real and important to him: "It makes a lot of difference to me that someone in America is reading my work, to think that it come all the way from England" (Interview, June 9, 1988). Leabow explains how hard she works to connect with the exchange audience, which is something she does not do for the examiner:

You had to ... sort of build up a personality for themselves so they could imagine what you were like through your personality ... you've really got to build up an image for yourself to make them see ... who you are. (Interview, June 9, 1988)

Leabow feels her exchange writing has to be "as interesting as you can" make it. Her goal is to "really impress them." To do that, she notes, "You got to make it slightly longer."

Currently the British examination system has become more conservative and many teachers feel it is deteriorating. It has changed to include more emphasis on terminal exams and less emphasis on portfolios or coursework; the British government feared that with portfolios only, it was difficult to know what students could do independently. The whole system, once in existence, is in constant motion, a kind of political football, with changes enforced in response to inevitably shifting governmental policies. Ultimately, the British teachers thought about good curriculum, good teaching, and high standards for student performance as issues quite unrelated to the national tests or to national standard-setting efforts. The U.S. teachers left the experience convinced that any kind of high-stakes examinations, with associated curriculum, would be harmful to their students' writing development.

From her U.S. vantage point, Bridget Franklin, Philippa's partner, had watched the students in England across the year. As she monitored the ebb and flow of writing coming into her classroom, she speculated about the effects of the British examinations:

I think there were some bugs, to tell you the truth.... we didn't get as much as we sent... It would be really wonderful if ... you really could get a whole set of papers and get to know them as writers, real writers.... I got the feeling ... that they just kind of put other things in their folders [for the examiner], and they didn't send us those things or something, which was unfortunate. (Interview, December 13, 1988)

In reflecting on her own situation, she concludes, "We were very lucky because we don't have those tests."

What happened in the British exam classrooms suggests that the path to curriculum reform through examinations, though tempting, remains elusive. As U.S. policy-makers and educators contemplate high-stakes examinations, hopes are high that the "right" kind of examinations will lead to improved instruction. Exams are popular among policy makers because they provide one of the few levers on the curriculum that they can control. And there are some potentially positive side effects, especially in engaging teachers in substantive professional debates about standards and standard setting and in the professional development that comes from being involved in creating and scoring performance-based exams. However, when exams take control of something as personal



as writing, the teacher and students no longer work together to own the writing; rather the writing is owned by a distant examiner. In the British exam classes individual pieces of writing were rushed; extended pieces that were common in the early years disappeared. Rules restricted teachers with respect to how much help they could give their students. An exam system can affect curriculum negatively, especially when the stakes are high and the exam is used to sort students in ways that determine access to higher education and to valued job opportunities. When exams function in this way the pressures on the classroom become formidable and not necessarily positive.

Darling-Hammond (1994) argues that any exams that function to sort people discourage educational equity and fail to promote school reform. She explains that "*changes in the forms of assessment [in the direction of portfolios and performance assessments] are unlikely to enhance equity unless we change the ways in which assessments are used as well: from sorting mechanisms to diagnostic supports; from external monitors of performance to locally generated tools for inquiring deeply into teaching and learning; and from purveyors of sanctions for those already underserved to levers for equalizing resources and enhancing learning opportunities*" (p. 7). Darling Hammond suggests that assessments will only be useful reform tools if they function as "top down support of bottom up reform" (p. 18). Similarly, George Madaus (1993) concludes that "the nation cannot test its way out of its educational problems ... it is the teachers, not tests or assessments, that must be the cornerstone of reform efforts" (p. 23).

These arguments are consistent with those who argue that reformers must begin by working collaboratively with schools and the communities they serve, involving teachers, administrators, students, and parents (for example, Comer's School Development Program, Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools, Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools). Although the reach of these efforts remains limited, although none attends equally well to every aspect of the problem, although none can begin to solve the larger social problems that plague schools serving high percentages of students from conditions of poverty (inadequate health care, poor nutrition, lack of economic opportunity), still these reformers are taking sensible first steps. They offer a welcome counterpoint to those who advocate reform-via-exam.

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## NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WRITING

The National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy (NCSWL), one of the education research centers sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, has completed its mission and no longer functions as an independent entity. The Center was based at the Graduate School of Education of the University of California at Berkeley, with a site at the Carnegie Mellon University. The Center provided leadership to elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities as they worked to improve the teaching and learning of writing. The Center supported an extensive program of educational research and development in which some of the country's top language and literacy experts worked to discover how the teaching and learning of writing can be improved, from the early years of schooling through adulthood. The Center's four major objectives were: (1) to create useful theories for the teaching and learning of writing; (2) to understand more fully the connections between writing and learning; (3) to provide a national focal point for writing research; and (4) to disseminate its results to American educators, policymakers, and the public. Through its ongoing relationship with the National Writing Project, a network of expert teachers coordinated through Berkeley's Graduate School of Education, the Center involved classroom teachers in helping to shape the Center's research agenda and in making use of findings from the research. Underlying the Center's research effort was the belief that research both must move into the classroom and come from it; thus, the Center supported "practice-sensitive research" for "research-sensitive practice."

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