

A Kind of Educational Idealism: Integrating Realism and Reform

LOUIS M. SMITH

Professor Emeritus, University of Washington

FORESHADOWING THE ISSUES

By intent, this essay has several major guiding assumptions. First, it has an autobiographical flavor, that is, it attempts to capture an individual's thoughts and activities from the early days of educational reform in the mid twentieth century. "Being around" and "involved" at that time carries its own kind of insight and testimonial. Second, an early case study of Kensington, an innovative elementary school, *Anatomy of Educational Innovation* (Smith & Keith, 1971) caught the imagination of a number of educators in schools and universities. Third, such an event – an innovative school and a book length monograph describing and conceptualizing the first year – had its own antecedents and consequences. Stories and conceptualizations became strands of educational innovation and change in their own right. These strands are a part of this small piece of educational history. This essay speaks to those as well. Fourth, the very task of writing about these events is a creative process and takes the author and reader into unexpected directions, yielding more ideas about the nature of educational idealism, realism, and school reform. Such are the tasks of this essay.

THE REALITIES OF COMPLEXITIES

Strangely perhaps, this story of the innovative Kensington Elementary School and other innovations began several years before in an urban classroom of the Washington School, in an impoverished area of the City of St. Louis. At that time it was "realism" we were after, yet we were using an innovative inquiry style that went by the varied labels of "case study," "micro-ethnography of the classroom," "participant observation," and "qualitative inquiry." More recent labels might refer to our approach as "action research" or "collaborative inquiry," in-vogue approaches for at least some parts of the educational community.

Our beliefs at the time are seen with minimal rewriting of history by reference to two short paragraphs in the preface of that book.

We think *The Complexities of an Urban Classroom* is probably the most intensive analysis that has been made of a single classroom. It is most likely the first time a college professor has spent all day every day within a slum classroom as an observer. It is probably the most intensive cooperative effort between an elementary school teacher and an educational psychologist to bring their varying points of view to bear on the day-to-day issues of teaching. Finally, the self-conscious attempt to describe carefully the mundane day-to-day events and then to interpret these within an internally consistent language makes the book a unique attempt to theorize about the problems of teaching. In consequence, it possesses a general as well as a particularistic view. (Smith & Geoffrey, 1968, p. v)

The reader will recognize in the text the quiet but latent nationally recognized voices of George Homans, Robert Merton and Hans Zetterberg who influenced the beliefs in this perspective. At a local level, the faculty and students of the Graduate Institute of Education at Washington University, and especially Larry Iannaccone and Sandy Charters, provided ideas, models, and support.

Our beliefs rippled outward in remaining pages but especially relevant for the present discussion is the next paragraph of the preface.

We believe our book will have several audiences, for it has several unusual features and can be read from several vantage points. Because the problems of urban education are timely, the layman, who usually has no clear perception of life in a classroom of a slum school, should profit from the extended detail reported in the fieldnote excerpts. Our intent has been to build clear and realistic images for readers whose elementary school backgrounds are foreign to the lower-class culture and yet whose positions in contemporary society require them to make intelligent decisions in this area. If we have made clear the magnitude of the urban education problem and some of the specific dimensions, we will be heartened. We have strong faith in the power of an aroused and informed citizenry to improve its present-day circumstances and institutions and in the power of public education to produce citizens who will approach the problems of the next generation with intelligence and courage. (Smith & Geoffrey, 1968, pp. v-vi)

At the time we did not enter into the difficult value issues and the content of the decisions that might be in contestation. It was the "realities," raised in anecdotes, images, vignettes, and conceptual analyses that we wanted to convey, starting points to bring one's values and hopes into play for the redesign of urban teaching and learning.

I would argue today that realities may well be multiple as people come to grips with what it is that is going on and what it is that needs changing. The nature of the changes follow from this kind of description and analysis *plus* the kinds of values and conceptions of the ideal individuals and the good society one hopes to help create through schooling. Now, three decades, and many changes later I would argue the need for more recent but similarly intensive views of schools and

classrooms. One does not have to focus on just the broadest issues of violence, abortion and right to life views, and affirmative action to realize that contention is widespread regarding values underlying the good life, the good society, and the role and responsibility of public schools in educating children. Busing, vouchers, Christmas tree displays, and creation science are close by in every public school and school district.

EXPLORING DOMAINS OF EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

The 1960's, especially with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, provided a context for opening multiple domains of educational innovation. Without realizing the broader significance at the time, my colleagues and I found that we were caught up in the proverbial tidal wave of educational change, innovation, and reform. In retrospect, I have labeled these "domains of educational innovation and reform." Some of these domains were quite specific, others quite general, some were organizational and structural, others were more substantive and programmatic, and others had to do with new methods of inquiry. In day to day practice many of these elements overlapped, synergistically, to use a phrasing of the times. Without question, for a young academic with a bit of talent, good training, and interests in the improvement of education those were "heady times." Idealism and optimism were everywhere. Though specific choices and decisions were always difficult at the time, explorations seemed limited mostly by our time and talent.

The Innovative Kensington Elementary School

After our semester in the Washington School, and as we were involved in writing that project report and later its conversion into a book, the opportunity arose to become involved in the Kensington Elementary School. An important generalization lurks here: in my experience opportunities never seem to sequence themselves well, schedules need to be juggled, work loads expand faster than resources (both personal time and energy and financial), and one commits to a motivational and intellectual ride that is beyond one's wildest imagination.

The Milford School District and Kensington School administrators were preparing for a major educational innovation: a uniquely designed building, unusual staffing, and radical programming of an elementary school. They came to the Graduate Institute of Education's Bureau of Consultant Services for a possible study of their efforts. They had a control group experiment in mind, but were willing to listen to my counter proposal for a more qualitative, participant observer, ethnographic, case study approach.

Several further major generalizations were implicit then. I had found the qualitative research stance to be a natural fit with several basic personality dispositions

of mine, ungodly open to every ounce of creativity I possessed, and a methodology that I wanted “to run.” Later I was to borrow a phrase from Tom Wolfe’s (1979) *The Right Stuff*, I wanted to fly the edge of the methodological envelope. An intriguing new methodology drove much of the inquiry I was to do over the years. Biographical antecedents and consequences exist in educational innovation.

A second generalization was developing, I found most school administrators willing to listen, discuss, and negotiate research proposals and activities when one makes “reasonable” and “creative” arguments. Not always, but usually. I still don’t understand quite why I found this to be so.

Third, funding options at that time were also in flux. Innovations were occurring. The Office of Education’s “small contract program,” grants of less than \$7500, had been created and was open for competition. We had won one of these with the project that became *Complexities*, and we submitted then and won one for what would become *Anatomy of Educational Innovation*. That funding innovation I found remarkably important, particularly when one is tackling problems and methods that are outside conventional norms.

Fourth, the Milford School Board discussed and voted approval for the project. As duly elected citizens, the board members acted as representatives for the community. That kind of governance is an important innovation that has lasted for decades if not centuries now in America’s local public schools. At the time I didn’t give much thought to that, but in recent years, as the politics of educational innovation has grown in importance in my mind, I have found that that long ago innovation, the annual election of school board members, is very important. More of the tangled roots of educational innovation and change are becoming apparent.

The preface to our book *Anatomy* suggests some of our broader beliefs about educational innovation some 25 years ago.

As the manuscript of this book is being set in galley and page proofs, the world of education – classrooms, schools, and ideas – continues in great ferment. Major reports such as *Crisis in the Classroom* and *Children and Their Primary Schools* are suggesting new waves of change to replace now older modes advocated in the *Restoration of Learning* and *Education for All American Youth*. (Smith & Keith, 1971, p. v)

At the time we didn’t do anything special with those observations and comments. The Educational Policies Commission book had been published in 1944. I had read it as an undergraduate in the late 1940’s and had been taken with its brand of community schools and progressive education. Arthur Bestor’s book, along with his earlier *Educational Wastelands* (1953), had created a stir in the late 1950’s. The ideological confrontations and the potential political implications were not especially salient and important for me then. Neither was the implicit historical perspective important for me at that time. This, too, would return with great force later, both substantively and methodologically. In retrospect, I now find myself being and behaving then somewhere between naive and stupid. Yet I felt then, and still feel now, that we wrote a very fine and important book.

Rather than those issues, at the time, we raised in the next paragraph of the preface several other important problems and ideas in the inquiry into and the substantive issues about school innovation and reform. We said then:

Through all this we are struck with the calm voice of Professor Maslow (1965) who has urged educational innovators to be “good reporters” and to tell the story of their attempts at change. (Smith & Keith, 1971, p. v)

We were intentionally buttressing our efforts with the wisdom of a pre-eminent American third force psychologist who in a one page note seemed to be making our case for us, a case that many educational psychologists would not accept from us alone. But we didn’t run his broader substantive ideas at greater length in the preface nor in the text itself. Nor do I recall how I found that reference in the *Humanist*, a journal I would be sympathetic to but which I didn’t read regularly. But a further generalization exists, “other occasions will arise,” and in a recent book chapter (Smith, in press-a) Maslow’s “the authoritarian character structure” from 1943 plays a major role in the argument I made there. The bigger generalizations may well be that there are currents of ideas and people who hold those ideas with whom one unconsciously or semi-consciously identifies with, and these ideas and people will reappear as one thinks through major issues in educational innovation. Later I will entertain some issues in life history, biography and autobiography which are important for a more fully developed point of view about innovation and change. Here it is the roots of thinking about innovation I am noting.

The second paragraph in the preface continued.

A series of circumstances led us to be that limited part of a courageous and important attempt to remake public education, in the rather typical middle class suburban school district of Milford. The setting was the Kensington School, a unique architectural structure with open space laboratory suites, an instructional materials center, and a theater, designed in what might be described as the square lines of classical Greek simplicity. The program exemplified the new elementary education of team teaching, individualized instruction, and multi-age groups. A broad strategy of innovation – the alternative of grandeur, the utilization of temporary systems, and minimal prior commitments – was devised and implemented. The intended outcome was pupil development toward maturity – a self-directed, internally motivated, and productive competence. (Smith & Keith, 1971, p. v)

In retrospect, I find that to be a densely packed paragraph revealing the nature and hopes of the Kensington School experience. We thought that the effort was courageous and important. We thought that the setting was rather typical suburban middle class. Although not mentioned in the preface the effort was local – ESEA was still a year or two away.

The particulars involved new architecture and space, the program was a collage of new ideas and arrangements about schooling, and a major strategy of innovation was planned and implemented. Open “learning suite” space, movable furniture