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Revisiting and Recovering an Educational Approach to School Inspection

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ABSTRACT The appointment of a new chief inspector from January 2017 offers the opportunity to re-set the relationship between Ofsted and the teaching profession. Both inspectors and teachers need to readjust their mindsets, if inspection is to be seen as developmental and principled rather than judgemental and arbitrary. Without claiming that it was exemplary or that it was not without stress for the inspected or the inspectors, this article argues that the approach used by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) prior to 1992 should be revisited and lessons learnt for the further development of school inspection.

After retirement it is tempting to take a rose-tinted view of the past – in my case, of school inspection as practised before 1992 by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI). Critics of Ofsted reinforce that tendency by claiming to detect a marked difference between the calibre of inspectors currently employed by Ofsted and those employed in the halcyon days before its introduction. This tendency towards idealisation needs to be resisted as far as possible and a realistic appraisal made.

As an organisation, HMI was a mixed blessing to governments whose education policies it both advised on and inspected. Despite claims to the contrary, it was never fully independent, could not publish without political consent and was abolished partly because it pushed too hard on the boundaries of its licenced semi-independence. To generalise (and there always were exceptions), its members were a talented, highly experienced group of individuals but with talents that were not fully or even sufficiently utilised. Like all educational institutions, it never fully lived up to its ideals, though some individuals got close. However, the one thing it got almost 'right' was its view of school inspection itself. It is that which now needs revisiting and, after due reflection on changing circumstances, re-establishing. What follows is an

attempt to characterise the heart and mind of that educational approach to inspection (Richards, 2016).

According to that view, the essence of inspection is the exercise of professional judgement – easy to say but very difficult to characterise; easier to recognise than to define. It's certainly not a matter of ticking off a hundred and one vaguely expressed criteria preceded by an online assessment and a short course. Vickers gets close to it in his book *The Art of Judgement*. He usefully distinguishes two aspects of that kind of overall appreciative judgement which school inspectors have to make: reality judgements involving facts about the state of any system, such as the school being inspected; and value judgements – that is, 'making judgements about the significance of these facts' (Vickers, 1983). Note, Vickers terms it an 'art'.

In an inspection, reality judgements are derived from observations and discussions in class and around school, but crucially these are mediated through past experience and involve 'mental processes often complex and prolonged, resulting in inferences, forecasts ... and conclusions' (Vickers, 1983). Such judgements cannot be characterised as objective or regarded as incontestable. Nor can the value judgements that have to be made: they 'cannot be *proved* correct or incorrect; they can only be *approved* as right or *condemned* as wrong by the exercise of another value judgement' (Vickers, 1983). The notion of objectivity is replaced by the notion of 'trained judgement' in order to make an aspect of the world – in this case a school – intelligible. All this implies that inspection cannot and should not claim to be more than the professional subjective judgement of a group of experienced, expert observers. As such, the findings of any inspection are contestable and never definitive. This needs recognising in any future re-evaluation of inspection.

Crucially, inspection relies on the collective, not the individual, judgement and experience of the inspectors. As Vickers stresses, 'judgment and decision, though mental activities of individuals, are ... part of a social process. They are taken within and depend on a net of communication, which is meaningful only through a vast, partly organised accumulation of largely shared assumptions and expectations, a structure constantly being developed and changed by the activities it mediates' (Vickers, 1983). This collective judgement-making is based on wide experience of a variety of institutions in different educational contexts nationwide. It is 'forged' or metaphorically 'hammered out' through lengthy discussion and deliberation with other similarly experienced colleagues. The result is a collective but unique set of judgements, not a set of off-the-shelf ones. The notion of collective 'hammered-out' judgment is crucial; no published report should be the work of one individual alone. Individual views need to be moderated with those of others to arrive at as defensible a judgement as possible.

Though it may appear pretentious, inspection is a form of joint educational connoisseurship, not bound by clear-cut, straightforward, incontestable criteria. In considering how an 'expert connoisseur' makes aesthetic judgements, the philosopher Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, 1980) gets

close to helping us understand the nature of inspection judgements and how they are justified. He comments:

> We learn certain things only through long experience and not from a course in school. How, for instance, does one develop the eye of a connoisseur? Someone says, for example, 'This picture was not painted by such-and-such a master.' He may not be able to give any good reasons for his verdict. How did he learn it? Could someone have taught him? Yes – not in the same way as one learns to calculate. A great deal of experience was necessary. That is, the learner probably had to look at and compare a large number of pictures by various masters again and again. In doing this he could have been given hints. Well, that was the process of learning. But then he looked at a picture and made a judgement about it. In most cases he was able to list his reasons for his judgement, but generally it wasn't they that were convincing. The value of the evidence varies with the experience and the knowledge of the person providing it, and this is more or less the **only** way of weighing such evidence since it cannot be evaluated by appeal to any system of general principles or universal laws.

Applying these insights to inspection implies that professional expertise cannot be acquired from 'a course' or, at least, not just from a course or series of courses. It involves learning from a wide range of teaching and inspection experience in a variety of relevant contexts, preferably not confined to a single geographical area. It involves looking at and comparing a large number of lessons by 'various masters again and again'. It is not like 'learning to calculate' or its equivalent – learning from an inspection rule book or tick list. It involves learning from others more experienced in making judgements of teaching quality who can 'hint' at what is required and who can discuss the complexities and intangibles of classroom observation – hopefully as a result in part of joint observations. Like connoisseurs, inspectors should be able to 'list reasons' for their judgements, but these can never be absolutely 'convincing' given the difficulties involved in interpreting learning. The value of the judgements and the evidence they use to back them up depends on the experience and knowledge of the person making them. Quoting Wittgenstein (1980), 'this is more or less the *only* way of weighing such evidence since it cannot be evaluated by appeal to any system of general principles or universal laws' enshrined in any inspection handbook or subsidiary guidance.

Because of the mix of reality and value judgements involved in the act of educational connoisseurship, an inspection team can never claim that their interpretation of a school is the only correct one. Nor should inspectors ever claim a monopoly of objective, authoritative judgement. Equally importantly, that unique set of judgements cannot be directly or robustly compared with the equally unique set of judgements of a school in a different context or even with the judgements of the same school (which never remains 'the same school')

inspected at a different time. Each set of inspection judgments is in a sense *sui generis*. Direct comparison of inspection judgements over time or from school to school is at best highly problematic and at worst invalid.

With their focus on observation and discussion, inspectors can only report and interpret activities seen at a particular point in time – a 'snapshot'. They cannot comment with any plausibility on what has happened in the past or predict what will happen in the future. Unlike in the current Ofsted inspection regime, inspectors cannot comment with any authority or conviction on progress over time, whether by groups of pupils or by the school itself, since they do not have first-hand access to the past. Admittedly they may have a past inspection report to refer to; but they do not have full access to their predecessors' assumptions, expectations or deliberations for comparison nor can they know with any certainty what has transpired in the interval between inspections. Data from the past may be available, but data are fallible, contestable, variously interpretable and very partial as indicators. They cannot be interpreted except in the light of close knowledge of the context in which they were generated, and this is denied the inspectors visiting and reporting later. The judgements inspectors make can only be as 'they seemed to them at the time'. Every inspection report is inevitably to some extent out of date immediately after the inspection, but that does not mean it is not useful in the short-to-medium term as a basis for professional reflection and development. The time-specific 'instant' nature of inspection judgements and their inability to comment meaningfully on progress, whether by the school or by its students, need to be more fully recognised in any re-evaluation of inspection.

The heart of inspection is a professional judgement about the quality of teaching experienced by pupils in a school. Arriving at that judgement does not involve looking for particular teaching methods and then gauging their effectiveness in terms of promoting learning. Rather the reverse. Inspectors look for evidence of pupils' learning in terms of their observable responses to teaching and then work back to those factors that have promoted, or hindered, their learning. There should be no automatically approved teaching methodology. 'The unanticipated success of the wrong method' needs to be recognised and celebrated. Judgements about the quality of teaching in lessons and in the school as a whole are properly tentative and consequently have to be offered as such in any feedback to those who have been observed. There is inevitably a considerable degree of inference involved in the judgements, especially those relating to the extent to which learning has taken place; there is inevitably too an element of professional judgement as to which features of the lesson have contributed to, or inhibited, whatever learning is inferred as having taken place. That tentativeness is crucial to the context in which any feedback is being given. It offers the opportunity in dialogue for other tentative, evidence-based interpretations to be offered by the person being observed. Abandoning the making of judgements about the quality of teaching in a school would deal a death blow to professional inspection and leave data as almost the sole determinant of quality.

The evaluation of teaching and other aspects of the school is inevitably qualitative; nothing speaks for itself; everything needs interpreting, and that interpretation inevitably involves value judgements and the use of qualitative descriptors such as 'good', 'very good', 'excellent', 'satisfactory', 'reasonable', 'fair', 'poor', etc. There can be no stipulation as to which qualitative terms are to be used; they must 'fit' the perceptions of the activity or activities being evaluated. They cannot be reduced to just four numerical grades as under the current Ofsted regime; reality is much more complex than that four-fold categorisation. That over-simplification may be useful for the purposes of educational accounting but fails to take into account the many and varied facets of educational reality which can only be captured (and then only in part) in well-crafted prose. Inspection teams need the freedom to dispense with artificial, misleading constructs such as overall inspection gradings and to present schools in their idiosyncratic variety with idiosyncratic descriptors to match. Each inspection report has to be bespoke – not a formulaic account with minimal variation from school to school. Misleading over-simplistic grades should make way for prose which gives a vivid sense of what a particular school is really like – as seen by a group of experienced, expert observers. That's the way schools are. That's the way they should be reported. That qualitative richness needs to be built into a re-evaluated inspection system.

At least one other feature of old-style HMI inspection needs incorporating. No school, however notionally 'outstanding', is perfect. There is always more to learn from the experience of other schools, and inspectors can help bring that experience to bear when making their recommendations. Inspections should result in recommendations, not, as at present, diktats as to 'what the school needs to do to improve'. Inspectors should raise issues a school needs to consider, not necessarily to act on; that's a crucial distinction. However, there is a professional obligation on the part of schools to respond publicly on how and why they have considered those recommendations, even if it is to reject them in part. This both reflects and reinforces a view of inspection as providing a set of provisional, tentative, time-specific judgements which inform, rather than necessarily override, the similarly provisional, tentative and time-specific judgements of staff and governors. Providing recommendations to consider, not slavishly and fearfully to act on, serves to respect rather than undermine the professional judgement of staff but also needs to be complemented by the need for a considered, public response to be given to a school's stakeholders, be they parents, governors, local authority officials or school commissioners. Unlike the current situation, inspection reports should never of themselves determine an institution's future but should inform it – another crucial distinction. Such reports can be powerful in their advocacy of the need to consider changing policy and practice on the part of those for whom they are written. That change in tone and substance would need to be part of a re-professionalised inspection system.

Curiously, even paradoxically, there will be no more timely an opportunity to reinstate the key principles of an educational approach to school

inspection than 2017 – the first year in post of a new chief inspector and of a new Ofsted chair. Both will need to foster a change in the teaching profession's mindset towards inspection so that it comes to be seen as a developmental, educational enterprise, not as a fault-finding accounting process. The early days of the new Ofsted regime have seen some promising work undertaken on the reliability of inspections (Ofsted, 2017) and some encouraging noises about reconsidering the 'outstanding' grade. Under its new management, Ofsted should review the current inspection framework and handbook as a matter of priority. Revisiting HMI's original principles could be a valuable way of reviewing the inspection process as well as renewing a two-way educational conversation with schools and teachers.

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