
Reciprocal Responsibility: why teachers should be the people to inspect schools

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ABSTRACT At a time of great threat to the education of the current school cohort caused by the prolonged COVID-19 lockdown, the phrase ‘never let a good crisis go to waste’ sounds apt. Education will have to change to meet new demands. The author wishes to advance the case for teachers, fully recognised as the key workers they are, to have their professional agency afforded greater respect in relation to school inspection. Teachers should become the inspectors. The article examines the current rationale for the inspectorate – one informed by politicians who have presided over reforms to public services which incorporate the logic of the free market. The author questions how appropriate such logic is to the provision of education. He advances the case for an alternative approach to ensuring high standards in schools – one which draws on the professionalism of serving classroom teachers and resembles a collaborative learning and professional development exercise. It is argued that this could be more efficient than the current approach, which strips teachers of their professional agency as part of a political agenda of deskilling that aims to make teachers more compliant and less costly. The author hopes to stimulate debate about how the assessment of teaching can be conducted and how the voices of serving teachers can be better heard.

Ofsted Out of Touch with Those in the Classroom

Ofsted has nothing to contribute to this current crisis.

Kevin Courtney, General Secretary of the National Education Union, responded with these words to a question from a teacher about what to expect from the government watchdog over the next stages of the educational response to COVID-19.[1] Hardly a revelatory sentiment, it is one that the majority of the teaching profession will have shared in normal times. But times of crisis are remarkable for their ability to bring into sharp focus the things that really matter and those that do not. The quango’s silence over how to educate children in unprecedented circumstances speaks volumes about its failure to live

up to its own motto: 'raising standards, improving lives'. Ofsted is revealed for what it is and what many teachers have known it to be: a political tool utilised to shape education in a manner that is appealing to politicians even when at odds with the profession itself – and perhaps especially then.

The way Ofsted inspects schools has changed more than once. However, the lack of esteem in which Ofsted is held by the teaching profession remains strikingly consistent. This has largely been due to the way Ofsted's labelling of schools as successful and unsuccessful has fitted a neo-liberal free-market view of the world based on competition. In such a view, gains and losses can only be measured in zero sums: what is lost by one is gained by another. By contrast, the majority of teachers view education not as a marketable commodity, but as a public service. Berry addresses this conflict of ideas neatly:

[I]f one accepts a view of education as a marketable commodity: schools need to produce material, certain workers are charged with managing and controlling this process and naturally the rate of production needs to be measured, inspected and compared to that of competitors. (Berry, 2016, p. 33)

The corporate management model of education has scant regard for teacher professionalism. Such disrespect is a significant feature of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), which has permeated education in the western world at least since the Thatcher and Reagan neo-liberal economic and cultural revolutions of the 1980s. It was boosted in Britain under the 2010-2015 Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition, which advanced the marketisation of education in England through its academy and free-school reforms (Sahlberg, 2012). Berry (2016), whose research comprises interviews with serving teachers across England, notes: 'Although the term "Ofsted" is never mentioned in any interview prompts, which talk about trust, autonomy and pressures, not one teacher failed to mention Ofsted – often within minutes of being asked about trust' (p. 33). Berry draws on the views of teachers judged favourably by Ofsted. These teachers are 'contemptuous of a process they considered intrusive and unhelpful' (p. 34). He attributes this verdict to the narrow and limited amount of evidence that Ofsted's current inspection process draws on, and the flawed logic behind the inspection itself: 'that somewhere there are perfect lessons, the quality and nature of which can be preserved and replicated and used elsewhere' (p. 34).

During the Coalition government, Ofsted was often seen by parents and school governors, as well as by teachers, as a political tool used to class schools as failing so that they could be taken over by academy chains, many of which were associated with Conservative Party donors. The opposition of parents is most significant here. It is they who the promoters of education-as-a-commodity claim to be championing, and whose interests (as consumers) they regard as being opposed to those of teachers (the producers). In his memoirs, David Cameron explicitly refers to the academies programme as being intended to make schools answerable to parents rather than to the local town hall.

Cameron (2019, p. 220) had faith that the market mechanism of competition would raise accountability, as well as standards, in the face of 'failure-preserving teachers' unions'. On the issue of increased accountability alone, he can be said to be correct.

The Inspectorate That Deprofessionalises Inspectors and the Inspected

That Ofsted has nothing to offer now on how to actually educate and safeguard children is, as I said, hardly revelatory. Inspectors are not in the business of offering such services. But even when judged as a body inspecting the work of others, there is much evidence of Ofsted's limitations. Richards (2016) sets out how it is empirically impossible for inspectors, when forming a judgement about a school, to meet the demands in the Ofsted handbook. The limited time inspectors spend in schools is not enough to cover the hundreds of points of consideration required. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, the agency that preceded Ofsted and used a less proscriptive inspection framework, focused more on offering professional advice and making suggestions for development, while also highlighting faults.

The inadequate nature of Ofsted's inspection procedures deprofessionalises the inspectors themselves. This, too, can be traced back to the political narrative around Ofsted's creation and its reform over time. Public discussion of the role of the inspectorate has been too narrow and inadequate. In his memoirs, Ken Clarke (2016, pp. 272, 274), the former education secretary who presided over Ofsted's creation, claims that he introduced it 'not to kick teachers' (although it is telling that he felt the need to address this perception) but to counter what he perceived as the tendency of education, as well as all other public services, to favour the needs of those who worked in the service over those who, in his words, 'consumed' the service.

Education (Out of Place) in the Free-Market Counter-revolution

That the term 'producer capture' originated from Sir Keith Joseph and his Centre for Policy Studies in the 1970s is significant. The Centre for Policy Studies is an openly Thatcherite think tank. It was set up to intellectualise the rollback of the social democratic post-war consensus, partly characterised by the involvement of unions in policy decisions (Centre for Policy Studies, 2019).[2]The extent to which this narrative has captured political thinking can be seen in the memoirs of Tony Blair, the first Labour prime minister since the Thatcher era. Blair (2010, p. 99) references an article he wrote for *The Times* in 1995, in which he stated: 'The education policy launched last week was not devised to please the National Union of Teachers. It was devised to meet the concerns of parents'. He reiterates that he accepted the market-orientated reforms of the Thatcher and Major governments not out of electoral calculation

but because he believed them to be the correct course of action. Even former union leader Alan Johnson recently resorted to the term ‘producer interest’ in an interview explaining why he felt the government was right to push for school reopening against the views of the majority of the teaching profession and its unions (LBC Radio, 18 May 2020).

Politicians routinely refer to parents rather than students when they speak of consumers of education. The dominance of the language of ‘consumers’ and the political assumptions which accompany it are significant and dangerous. First, applying the language of the market to public services paves the way for applying the logic of the market to their delivery. Second, this language casts producers and consumers as being somehow in conflict with each other, holding opposed and irreconcilable goals, which is an absurdity when considering the relationship between teacher and student. Both desire the student’s success. In some cases, teachers want this more than students themselves may appear to!

A false dichotomy provides the basis for Ofsted, an organisation which sees itself as keeping the producers of education in line in case they attempt to fleece their customers. Absent from this view is any trust in teachers as professionals who have the best interests of their students at heart, in much the same way as doctors with their patients or even politicians with their constituents. This distrust is out of step with the views of the public about which professions they trust to be truthful (Ipsos MORI, 2019). Teachers are trusted by 89% of the public, behind only nurses, doctors and dentists. Government ministers, who push the ‘producer capture’ narrative, win the trust of just 17%.

If doubt lingers in anyone’s mind that the public, as consumers, could not tolerate the idea of autonomous professionals working without being overseen by a politically motivated inspectorate, perhaps the ‘discourse of derision’ explains it (Ball, 1990). The public has been conditioned, since the 1970s as the Centre for Policy Studies proudly proclaims, to disregard the value of its public servants through regular and consistently derisory reference to them from certain journalists and politicians. Leading politicians have rarely considered that teachers’ professionalism might be the foundation on which to build the superstructure of the United Kingdom’s education system.

Services like education are not commodities. They should not be construed through market speak. Students certainly do not consume education from teachers who dispense it in a transactional fashion, and I doubt very many parents think of their child’s experience in school in this way. As Raworth says:

The market only values what is priced and only delivers to those who can pay. Like fire it is extremely efficient at what it does, but dangerous if it gets out of control. It also fails to deliver public goods on which its own success deeply depends. (Raworth, 2017, p. 82)

It can be argued that education is a human right to which all are entitled, regardless of their ability to pay. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights holds that: 'Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory' (United Nations, n.d.). This renders the notion of a 'free market' academic: in a truly free market, the consumer cannot be mandated to make a purchase (Chang, 2010, p. 23). The 'free market' does not exist in the fashion its supporters allege, so its ethos cannot straightforwardly be incorporated into every area of public life.

Reform Inspections and Increase Professional Agency

My former head of department used half jokingly to compare Ofsted inspectors to the ring wraiths from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Just as the wraiths had once been great kings until corrupted by the temptations of the ring of power, many Ofsted inspectors had once been teachers until tempted out of the classroom by the inspectorate's claim to 'raise standards and improve lives'. They found themselves doomed to bring nothing but misery to their former colleagues. The most insulting feature many teachers will report from Ofsted inspections is the out-of-touch nature of the inspectors. Many will not have been in the classroom full-time for years. Given the pace of change in education, that can render their previous experiences irrelevant anyway. So, why not require all those who inspect schools to be serving classroom teachers too?

It is true that the responsibility to teach and accountability for one's teaching are separate concepts. But this is not reflected in the way schools are currently inspected (Inglis, 2000). Accountability is largely a negative implement of political and social control, while responsibility is a moral notion requiring mutuality (Fielding, 2001). 'Responsibility' is the more appropriate term to apply to education, which is understood by the majority of teachers as a shared endeavour for the common good. The accountability that Ofsted deals in is preferred by Conservative-minded politicians as it better fits to the marketised view of education as a commodity. Fielding eloquently explains why serving teachers are capable of reviewing the work of their peers:

When we hold each other responsible we do so in ways that tend to reinforce the necessity of reciprocal engagement and foreground a set of dispositions and motivations that presume a human desire to do what is right and celebrate what is creative and joyful in each other's endeavours. (Fielding & Inglis, 2017, p. 151)

The Positive Power of Peer Review: reciprocal responsibility

My proposal is intended to democratise the process of school inspections by increasing the agency of the classroom professional. But why stop there? If parents still feel uneasy about the idea of teachers assessing each other, democracy can be extended to them too. A recall mechanism, similar to that which now exists for Members of Parliament, could be applied. If 10% of the

parents of a school felt an inspection had missed serious areas of concern, or serious concerns arise between inspections, a signed petition could trigger a reinspection, just as for Members of Parliament it can trigger by-elections. If a subsequent inspection reveals flaws the previous inspectors missed, then they, and not just the institution in which the failings occurred, will bear a portion of the responsibility. Sanctions for such wrongdoing would need to be determined, but could of course still result in being struck off from the profession or in criminal prosecutions, as is the case now for heinous abuses of safeguarding legislation. The significant difference here is that those involved in the inspection process would bear responsibility for its outcomes in a manner Ofsted's agents currently do not. This 'reciprocity of responsibility', identified by Fielding and Inglis (2017, p. 152), would go some way to counter the one-sided consumerist mindset promoted by neo-liberalism, in which the deeply unpleasant principle of 'never trust, always check' has been itself allowed to run unchecked in our perceptions of the motives of public servants.

The responsibility for teachers to raise not just their own standards of practice but also those of the profession as a whole could be embedded by making it part of the role of a teacher. As with jury service, a teacher could expect at some point to be called to undertake a year out of the classroom to travel the country reviewing other schools. Observing other teachers and networking with other schools are vital elements in mentoring and continuing professional development. So, why not adapt the inspection of schools to address these goods, and make the inspectorate what Ofsted claims to be: a supportive body dedicated to raising standards? Putting teachers in charge of inspection will at once raise their professional autonomy and status as gatekeepers of standards based on peer review rather than a top-down diktat. There should be no such thing as permanent inspectors whose sole job is to pass judgement on others doing a job they themselves do not do. The Department for Education can provide schools with the funding required to cover the salaries of serving teachers for the year they are drawn to visit other schools, with the expectation being that at the end of the year those teachers return to their schools, or chains of schools in the multi-academy trusts of England, and present an all-staff development session informed by what they saw in the other schools they visited – a virtuous circle for all involved.

What of these school visits? They are to be what they should always be: a learning opportunity for all involved. All schools have something of merit that they can teach to others, depending on their different circumstances. This lack of appreciation of context is a gaping hole in current Ofsted criteria. Serving classroom teachers are best placed to notice and comment appropriately on this difference in context when visiting schools (School Support Partnership, 2020, p. 9). The aim of these visits should be to point out what is going well, what can be improved and what could be shared to improve other schools. Unless clear evidence of malpractice, or continued ineffective practice, is found, schools should be assumed to be effectively meeting the needs of their communities. Richards (2016) details convincingly how Ofsted in its current form is asking

the impossible of its inspectors, let alone schools. His highly practical and admittedly interim suggestion for reform, which goes with the grain of (though not as far as) my suggestion, replaces the four current Ofsted gradings with two: 'good enough' and 'not good enough'.

It Is Accountability – But Not as We Know It

A template for my proposed reform already exists in the work of the Education Development Trust's Schools Partnership Programme, which to date is running in over 1300 schools.[3] The Programme describes its framework as developing the confidence, capability and culture in and between schools to lead their own improvement through a continuous cycle of self-review, peer review, and school-to-school support and improvement. It identifies 'isolation as the enemy of improvement' and talks directly of developing 'a willingness to hold each other to account for agreed outcomes' (Farrar & Cronin, 2017, pp. 1, 5). It advises being forever vigilant against the dangers of peer review becoming merely a cosy chat in the office or a judgement imposed on schools. Peer review must always retain a reciprocity created by a shared professional mission and sense that engaging in it is a constant part of professional life, an end unto itself (Farrar & Cronin, 2017, p. 6; School Support Partnership, 2020, p. 12).

The corollary to this is that inspections would be longer, more regular (say every two years) and more rigorous. Teachers would be observed more often but in a more positive and mutually beneficial context. Schools could expect their inspectors to be with them for at least a full school week, and every teacher to be seen. To be observed by a fellow professional from outside their own school and offered appropriate support or commendation for their work would be a service to teachers' professionalism. Currently, Ofsted sets a requirement of a minimum of five years' teaching experience to become an inspector. I would reduce this to three. In the spirit of reciprocal obligation to the profession, those new to it have as much right and need to be part of peer review as their more experienced colleagues. If the professional culture is to be shifted, it needs to begin from the ground up. Ensuring a proper balance of experience on new inspection teams will also be important. Teams should include people with a range of experience appropriate to the schools they will be inspecting.

To give one final example of how Ofsted's operation distorts the kind of profession which teaching could be, consider what happens when we move away from the language of Ofsted ratings. If we must stick to labels, how about 'very effective', 'effective' and 'not yet effective'? These terms were suggested by education blogger, author and trainer Mike Fleetham (2014), who led a session on pedagogy at the Young Teachers conference organised by the National Union of Teachers in 2016, which I was fortunate to attend. Afterwards, I suggested to my principal (someone who in that year's honours list had received an MBE for his 20 years' service as a school leader) that we replace the Ofsted language we were using in school with these terms. To my great surprise, he

agreed. He recognised this language as expressing his own desired change from observations done to people to a collaborative process people took ownership of. Real professionals do not need an office to tell them what standards to apply and how to apply them in the name of accountability. They take responsibility for creating and meeting these standards themselves. That is what real professionalism means.

Notes

- [1] This was during a video conference on 14 May 2020 for representatives of the National Education Union in response to government advice on reopening schools from 1 June.
- [2] <https://www.cps.org.uk/about/>
- [3] <https://www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com/our-research-and-insights/case-studies/the-schools-partnership-programme>

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