Questionable questioning, and imposter syndrome

A provocation and two reminiscences

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Abstract

In a previous article in *FORUM*, Ofsted's criteria for 'outstanding grades' were described as 'outstanding nonsense'. In the first part of this short two-part article, a similarly sceptical view is taken in regard to one important practice in the current Ofsted framework – interviewing children to see how much they remember of the curriculum they have been taught. Such questioning is argued to be 'questionable'. Then, in a pair of reminiscences which comprise the second part, the author, himself a former school inspector who worked for HM Inspectorate and Ofsted for 13 years, considers 'imposter syndrome': that gap between self and role which a teacher or inspector may suddenly become aware of, perhaps acutely.

Keywords: school inspection; school inspector; knowledge-gap; imposter syndrome

Part one: Questionable questioning

'Children have gaps in their knowledge.' This verdict features in too many primary inspection reports issued under the current Ofsted framework for inspection.

Ofsted inspectors are now regularly asking primary- age children to recall what they have learned as an indicator of the impact of the curriculum they have experienced. It sounds very reasonable and sensible but is it, especially where it results in judgments of children's progress that influence published gradings?

All of us involved in primary education hope that children make progress. All learners do so … to differing degrees, to differing timescales and using differing pathways. But assessing that progress is both difficult and problematic – at the individual, class and whole-school levels.

One of the most important focuses of the current Ofsted inspection framework is an assessment of the impact of a school's curriculum based on pupils' progress. One of its grade descriptors states, for example, that in good or outstanding schools: 'Pupils are making progress in that they know more, remember more and are able to do more'. The evidence base for making such judgments includes 'observations of and interviews with pupils or classes who are following this curriculum in lessons, including scrutinising the pupils' work'. However, there is a major problem, not acknowledged explicitly by Ofsted or solved by its methodology. Progress by definition takes place *over time* but

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inspection takes place at a *particular* time. And there's the rub.

How then can pupils' progress be assessed through inspection? How can an inspector new to a school or class judge that pupils 'know more' when he or she has little or no information about what pupils knew at any particular time in the past? How can an inspector judge that pupils 'remember more' when he or she has no information about what they could remember at a particular time? The same question applies to what pupils are able to do.

Setting aside the school's own assessment data, as Ofsted does, and in the absence of recent well-authenticated performance data from national assessments, there are only three main sources of information about children's possible progress – each of them problematic. These are discussions with pupils about how much they have learned or remembered; discussion with teachers about the same issues; and scrutiny of pupils' past work.

Despite the claims sometimes made for teaching based on so-called 'cognitive science' no one, whether primary-aged child or school inspector, can possibly be expected to have total, or near-total, recall of what they have experienced a week, a month or a year ago. The most that can be expected is partial recall, and even that requires sensitive prompting by the questioner who needs to know the context of the experience being discussed and, in particular, the language originally used to mediate that original experience. But how can an inspector possibly have this? Schemes of work or lesson plans (even if still available weeks or months after) can provide clues to that experience but not in the detail necessary for a judgment.

Then there are the conditions necessary for that sensitive questioning of children to take place. Exploring children's past learning in any depth takes time, in particular to delve beyond immediate answers to ascertain understanding rather than superficial recall. Hurried question-and-answer exchanges cannot suffice. If, as should be the case, several children need to be questioned about the same topic in order to assess the impact of any part of the curriculum, that again requires time in a time-pressured inspection. Can it always – or even often – be found?

There also needs to be an appropriate, quiet setting for the questioning – not always possible given the crowded and often distracting ecology of a primary classroom. Perhaps more important still is the necessity of a stress-free environment for both inspector and child, something virtually impossible given the stressful nature of the inspection process and the fact that children are confronted with a strange, potentially threatening adult, however well-intentioned or experienced. How valid can children's recall of a specific part of the curriculum be in such situations?

The same limiting conditions apply if teachers are questioned by inspectors about the progress made by individual children. Answers given briefly during snatched conversations in a lesson are problematic. So too are more considered answers proffered

outside a lesson under the highly stressful environment of an inspection. Teachers will have their own assessment data of children's progress and attainment, though not for non-tested subjects, and anyway such data will not be verified and used by inspectors. Teachers are unlikely to have detailed records of children's individual reactions to any particular topic taught.

Which leaves work scrutiny as a source of evidence of children knowing more, remembering more and doing more. But how reliable and valid can it be? Its value depends on a number of questionable assumptions. It assumes that an inevitably cursory examination of written work can clearly reveal children's progress in understanding over time and that mathematics and English, the focus of many 'deep dives', are all important in that progress. It assumes that children's learning is linear, never regressive or repetitive. It assumes too that the progress of year group, a class or a subset of pupils can be generalised from a small, notionally 'representative' sample of children's work. It assumes too that all inspectors are following the same procedures and criteria when making their judgements. But how valid can these assumptions be when the process has to be undertaken in time-pressured conditions, often without the children being present to discuss their work in detail with an inspector?

All of this throws doubt on the value Ofsted places on interviewing children as a way of exploring the impact of the curriculum, and on its emphasis on remembering as a proxy for learning and understanding. And yet in report after report, inspectors are still reporting 'gaps' in children's knowledge as evidence that a school's curriculum does not have its intended impact.

I am tempted to conclude that the chief inspector and her colleagues should acknowledge the wisdom in the old adage that education is what's left when you've forgotten everything you have been taught.

Postscript

Prior to publication, this article was sent to Ofsted for comment. This is the response received from Chris Russell, national director, education. *FORUM* readers will be able to judge how adequate (or not!) the response is to the points raised.

> Ofsted school inspections focus on the curriculum. To evaluate the curriculum, we must understand what a school is trying to teach (intent), how effectively it is taught (implementation), and whether children are learning what the curriculum intends they should.
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> Pupils need to remember what they are taught so that they can engage in the more complex ideas and tasks that require that knowledge as a foundation. As inspectors, we need to understand the extent to which this has been achieved in order to evaluate the school.

I should be clear that inspectors do not look at whether pupils understand a specific list of concepts, but whether they understand whatever it is that the school's own curriculum says they should at that moment in time.

We accept, of course, that there are limits as to what can be garnered about pupils' learning during an inspection, and, of course, this is true of any single evidence source. However, this does not mean that nothing can be gathered about what pupils have learned, or that we should ignore this source of evidence. It means that we need to understand it in the context of the other evidence we collect which, I assure you, is the case on all inspections.

I think, too, parents would struggle to understand how we can evaluate the effectiveness of a curriculum, and of a school, without some understanding of what children have actually learnt.

Part two: On imposter syndrome

Anyone involved in education must suffer from imposter syndrome to some degree. Teachers' expectations of themselves, and others' expectations of them, are so high that the gap between expectation and reality is huge. The same surely applies with even more force to those asked, as inspectors, to judge something as undefinable as quality – whether quality of teaching, learning, the curriculum or leadership. All we can offer is our best, fallible, judgment based on our own knowledge and experience mediated by our values and by discussion with those with whom we work.

We all feel imposters from time to time because of the nature of our work. Sometimes that feeling is intensified as a result of memorable experiences.

Let me offer two examples from my own experience; you can add others from your own.

1975

The year was 1975. I had spent a couple of years teaching in a college of education following a primary deputy headship and a master's degree in education – the latter almost an oxymoron! A lecturing post in primary education was advertised at the school of education at Leicester University – then regarded as one of the best university education departments. Already feeling something of an imposter, I nevertheless applied and was amazed to be invited to be interviewed. I was told by insiders to expect two kinds of interview on the day – an informal one with the director, Professor Brian Simon, and later a formal interview with a panel chaired by him. The former was believed to be by far the most important and, I was told, convince Brian Simon in the morning interview and he would be extremely influential in determining the outcome of the formal proceedings.

When I arrived in Leicester I found that only two candidates (out of how many?) had been called – 'John Marsh' (or so I'll call him) and myself. I went in first for an informal but gruelling 60-minute informal interview with the director. Brian was his amiable, slightly absent-minded but very shrewd professorial self – asking a multitude of penetrating questions and seemingly … seemingly … interested and convinced by my responses. My impostor thoughts were receding. I seemed to be connecting. I was beginning to think that I was really in with a chance of landing what was to me a prestigious post.

After an hour Brian finished the interview, and seeing me out said: 'Thank you for coming Mr Marsh'.

Later that day Colin Richards was appointed … My imposter syndrome was reinforced.

1986

As an HMI, I was working part of the time in Elizabeth House and partly in County Durham as primary specialist. Momentarily setting aside my strong sense of impostor syndrome, I applied for the recently advertised post of staff inspector (curriculum). A week or two before I was told a decision would be made, I found myself organising a major conference in Scarborough for teacher educators on the implications of recent government policies for education. One of the two main speakers was Eric Bolton, senior chief inspector; coincidentally the other was Brian Simon himself, my former boss, whom I had invited to give an outsider's perspective.

Partly because of the imminent announcement about the staff inspector post, and partly because I could never quite get rid of feeling imposter-ish as the organiser of national conferences, I was feeling very nervous as I drove to Scarborough station to pick up Eric Bolton and take him to the hotel where the conference was to take place. Eric got in the car and sat beside me. As he did so I caught a momentary glimpse of a yellow post-it that I had left on the front seat. Arriving in the hotel car park Eric got out of the car but the yellow post-it was missing! I heard myself saying: 'Get back in the car Eric. I know I have applied for the staff inspector post but I don't want you to misinterpret what I'm about to do as a form of ingratiation. I need to grope up your backside to retrieve a missing post-it'. The act was performed – to amusement on his part and embarrassment on mine.

Two weeks later I was appointed staff inspector. My imposter syndrome was reinforced yet again! How's yours?

Colin Richards relishes being called 'an old-fashioned HMI' by Chris Woodhead, Ofsted's second chief inspector, who did not mean it as a compliment.

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