

# Editorial

## Educational inspection: coercive or responsive?

*Patrick Yarker*

What balance should be struck between the collaborative element of educational inspection, intended to foster a school's development, and the unavoidable evaluative and judgemental aspects? Collaboration implies reciprocal responsiveness, while the prospect of public judgement can feel coercive to those being judged. The tension at the heart of educational inspection – how responsive should it be? how coercive? – energises many of the contributions to this number of *FORUM*.

Strain and anxiety result from this tension. They are felt more and more deeply as Ofsted, England's educational inspectorate, evolves beyond the organisation which preceded it: Her Majesty's Inspectorate. Several contributors to this number worked for that organisation before they joined Ofsted. An insider's understanding informs their critical analysis of Ofsted's policy evolution, its current focus, its unresponsive culture, and the power wielded by the person at its head.

Practitioners continue to raise long-standing objections to the process by which their work is inspected. Too often they feel 'done to', denied agency and voice, and without adequate recourse to appeal judgements which may define a career. Underlying all the articles in this number is the question of how inspectors guard against that most malign forgetfulness, forgetfulness of the duty of care – a duty derived from the ethical responsibility always and everywhere owed the other person.

Colin Richards goes to the heart of the matter. He reminds us that the original Ofsted remit was to evaluate and inform; it was for schools and their governing bodies to consider and then decide what to do with the inspection's findings. Colin offers 'a set of principles underlying an inspection system defensible in terms of the possibilities and limitations involved in the exercise of professional judgment in educational contexts'. He argues that restoring these principles would transform the way educational inspection is carried out, for they spring from an understanding of the nature of professional judgement very different from that which currently obtains. Colin explores the implications (and the limits) of the appeal to 'professional judgement', and shows up the shortcomings of any approach which attempts to claim for educational inspection scientific objectivity and incontestable findings. There must be criteria for judgement, but these must be arrived at and agreed collectively in discussion with colleagues, not handed down ready-made in an inspection handbook. He particularly emphasises the inspectors' duty of care. That duty will be a recurring theme across the number.

Peter Mortimore compares the work of Ofsted with that of inspection regimes

developed in other countries, notably Estonia, France and Denmark. He considers Ofsted's highly politicised creation, how it has changed and developed over the years, and the main criticisms it has faced and is facing 30 years on from its inception. Chief among these are the reliability of its judgements, the lack of adequate mechanisms to challenge them, and the use of blunt telegram-gradings to sum up a school. Given the vast amounts of public funds spent on schools, there's a clear case, Peter Mortimore argues, for a dedicated inspectorate tasked to help government ensure such money is well spent. He acknowledges how hard it is to reconcile the need to scrutinise the work of professionals with the need to trust them, but tersely concludes: 'The current Ofsted model is hardly fit for purpose. It is based on a lack of trust in school staff. No European country maintains a similar model. Furthermore, there is little evidence that Ofsted makes for a better education system'.

The tension, too often unproductive, between the school and the inspector, is the focus of Julie Price Grimshaw's article. She examines in detail the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools, and in particular on headteachers, and the effect generated by Ofsted's precipitate decision to recommence school inspections from January 2021. Especially troubling is the evidence that too many Ofsted inspectors, including the chief inspector, were unwilling to countenance the idea that the pandemic wasn't over, or to accept that, months after the official end of the emergency, the effects of lockdowns and all that went with them were still being felt among staff and young people and needed to be taken into account. As one teacher puts it, 'they kicked us when we were down'.

If school staff find the experience of an Ofsted inspection stressful, even oppressive, Adrian Lyons suggests that working for the inspectorate is hardly more enjoyable. He urges Ofsted to draw from the experience of its predecessor, HM Inspectorate, and re-make itself into an organisation more habitable for its workforce, as well as more helpful for schools. He notes the very high turnover in inspectors and the 'unsustainable, unsatisfying workload', as well as the potential, all too often realised, for Ofsted to become merely a mechanism to implement the chief inspector's views about education. He draws attention to the unequal way in which inspections address different aspects of the curriculum. The inevitable result has been a narrowing of the basis on which judgements about educational quality are made.

It falls to Harmer Parr, drawing on long experience, to mount a defence of Ofsted. He asks how the conflicting demands on inspectors to support those working in a school while also holding them impartially to account may best be addressed. What will help ensure that a school inspection really contributes to a school's improvement? Inspectors must observe teaching at first hand and rely on first-hand evidence, he argues, but there is complementary value in data-based approaches, despite their shortcomings. Inspection by an external body allows a more rigorous and objective approach than tends to characterise a school's self-evaluation or the practice of schools pairing up to

inspect each other. He defends the current grading system, noting that a designation of ‘requires improvement’ is more likely now to lead to action to improve a school than did the previous equivalent grading of ‘satisfactory’. First and foremost, inspectors must consider what is in the best interests of the pupils. Where a school is not good enough, this should be made publicly clear so that necessary radical change can happen. He concludes by claiming that no other system has yet shown it can adequately meet the twin requirements of accountability and improvement.

Aware of the pressures inspection must impose, and sympathetic to staff as they face it, David Singleton closely considers the way in which inspection judgements are arrived at. Of the approach taken by HMI prior to Ofsted, he says: ‘[We] made judgements based on professional experience and know-how and then, if required, offered as much explanation as was needed to arrive at a consensus that the judgement was at least tenable’. By the end of the 1980s, this approach was seen by the government of the day as outmoded. It was being roundly urged that all criteria of judgement be made explicit. But lists of criteria to help decide judgement soon become checklists which determine it. They render discussion redundant as the means by which fair and reasonable judgement may hope to be arrived at among those concerned. Of late, however, David Singleton detects improvements in Ofsted’s approach, not least in the opportunity given to headteachers to talk to the lead inspector about their school’s context. The question remains whether these are always the ‘serious disciplined conversation based on shared understandings and common values’ which David Singleton avers are at the heart of good responsive inspection practice.

The ‘reliability’ of public judgements is tangled in the issue of trustworthiness. Recourse to quantitative methods alone cannot untangle it. Ofsted inspectors allocate performance ratings for schools and make these public, but as Terry Pearson demonstrates, the judgements made by inspectors in order to arrive at these ratings are inherently variable and in one sense ‘unreliable’. In his view, Ofsted’s claims for reliability rest on classical measurement theory and its associated computational techniques, whereas a more discriminating and sophisticated understanding of the issue of reliability is required. In particular, the current methods used to validate inter-inspector reliability are not robust enough or refined enough to substantiate the claims Ofsted makes.

In a concise and even-handed article, David Scott considers issues of safeguarding at Cavendish Primary School. Over many years, the school worked to make this a strength, but its Ofsted rating of ‘outstanding’ was downgraded to ‘inadequate’ following an inspection which judged safeguarding at the school to be ineffective. Before the inspection report could be published, the school’s headteacher, Ruth Perry, took her own life. David Scott asks: ‘Are limiting judgements the right approach whereby the whole school fails if safeguarding is ineffective? Where practice is strong and pupils feel

safe and are safe, but the weaknesses are in documentation and specific procedures, should schools be given the time to correct these before publication of the report and subsequent negative labelling?’ In the light of what happened at Cavendish, Ofsted has altered certain procedures. But do these changes go far enough to allay the concerns of schools?

As this year’s spring number of *FORUM* showed, we in England can learn much from developments in Wales and Scotland. Ann Keane outlines aspects of the approach taken by the Welsh inspectorate, Estyn. She traces the history of school inspection in Wales, including the rationale behind the introduction at the start of this century of a peer-inspection process, similar to that which Ofsted adopted almost a decade later. The aim in Wales was to encourage more positive engagement by schools in the process of inspection and school improvement, not least through recognition of the wider political, economic and social contexts within which school inspection takes place. More recently, movement towards a more generally collaborative approach has continued, with summative gradings or judgements done away with. Further changes are likely to the role of Estyn and its informing perspective following the introduction of the ‘Curriculum for Wales’, which is predicated on a more holistic understanding of the purposes of education than currently prevails in England.

Tom Wylie considers the ‘lived experience’ of school from the point-of-view of the pupil. He asks what space is made for this perspective (as against the views of parents and carers) in Ofsted’s overall approach to inspection? Youth services organised by local authorities and voluntary organisations used to be inspected, and the reports inspectors compiled afforded insight into the lives of the young beyond school. Tom Wylie calls for the contemporary inspectorate to pay more attention to young people as they engage in informal learning outside the classroom. Inspection, he writes, ‘has largely fallen back on the assessment of instrumental education in formal institutions. But, in the end, it is not academic learning of concepts and arguments which enables us to define ourselves as moral beings engaged in the world: rather, it is through concrete experiences of that world’.

Ofsted’s use of blunt summary judgements is a target for Barry Dufour, an erstwhile Ofsted inspector who remains involved in the evaluation of educational provision overseas. He reflects on particular moments in the history of the organisation, linking the deployment of a new-style inspectorate with the imposition of a high-stakes public testing regime. He notes how the inspection of cross-curricular elements of school provision caused Ofsted difficulties, and deprecates – as do other contributors – the amount of power in the hands of the chief inspector. He gives his own verdict on the performance of more than one holder of that office.

Ofsted is given credit by Megan Pacey for transforming the quality of children’s welfare and protection in early years education and care settings, and for establishing

a uniform set of quality standards against which all settings are regulated. She draws attention to the damagingly fragmented nature of early years provision, its inequitable funding, and the pressure staff in the sector are under to secure and retain a high Ofsted grading. She calls for bold, wholesale and sustained reform.

For Wendy Scott, educational inspection has always been an important means to help in the professional development of practitioners. She argues that this stance, generally shared by those who lean toward a more collaborative approach to inspection, has been marginalised within Ofsted. Since at least 2010, Ofsted has more and more become ‘an enforcer of government policy’. She decries the way in which nursery and early years foundation stage (EYFS) provision continues to be inspected by some people with no teaching qualifications relevant to the phase, and without experience of its institutions. Confidence among practitioners in the resulting judgements is greatly damaged. She quotes the properly complex definition of teaching in the early years contained in Ofsted’s own inspection handbook, and argues that to ascertain a reasonable view of its quality, prolonged observation of teaching in an EYFS setting and dialogue with practitioners are essential.

Frank Norris writes to thank those HMI colleagues who supported, encouraged and challenged him in his work as an Ofsted inspector across the first decade of this century. He laments what he sees as the decline in the quality of mentoring and induction in today’s organisation, citing this as one reason why inspectors are so dissatisfied with their job and move on quickly rather than remaining in post. Something vital has been lost from the inspectorate, and the entire education service is the poorer.

As a small service to practitioners and other staff undergoing Ofsted inspection, we publish an anonymously produced pro forma which, we are assured, renders it simple to determine the quality of the inspection being undergone. Here at last, or so it is claimed, is a means by which you may grade for yourself the professional knowledge, skills, behaviour and attitude of the inspectors who are inspecting your work, and the ways in which lead inspectors and senior managers conduct themselves and approach their difficult tasks!

Ofsted helps shape what practitioners think as well as what they do, and not always for the better. In a carefully worded, hard-hitting article, Julia Snell and Ian Cushing draw on their own research to show Ofsted intervening in – rather than simply inspecting – approaches to the teaching of English and literacy. The understanding of language which the inspectorate seems to hold is shown to be rooted in a long tradition in English education of deficit thinking about working-class children and the racially marginalised, and results in ‘race-class inequalities [being maintained] under a guise of social justice, equality and evidence-based practice’. This faulty and culpable understanding manifests itself in various ways, especially via inspection reports which carry significant power to affect the way schools frame policies around writing, reading,

talking and listening. Unwelcome consequences follow in the lives of children and teachers, notably in connection with the way the teaching of writing is approached, and in relation to the 'ability' discourse and the assigning of 'ability' labels to pupils.

The accession of a new chief inspector affords the perfect opportunity for the inspectorate to look at itself and its ways of working. Many contributions to this number of *FORUM* declare or imply that the balance in educational inspection has swung too far, and for far too long, towards the coercive and away from a more collaborative and responsive, though no less rigorous, praxis. Can Ofsted's new chief inspector institute the necessary thorough-going reform of the organisation? Or must an entirely new inspectorate be established, founded on the best of the past and aligned with a more humane and responsible conception of formal education and its inspection?

Finally, a word of thanks to Colin Richards, co-editor of this number, though more than a word is owed him. Colin brought to the work of producing this capacious number invaluable understanding, insight and experience in matters of educational inspection policy and practice. He coupled a shrewd and fastidious editorial eye with a supportive and encouraging stance towards contributors. I am extremely grateful to him. The number's errors and inadequacies must be laid at my door.