

Changing features of school inspection

A perspective from Wales

Ann Keane

Abstract

This article traces how some features of school inspection in England and Wales have changed since Her Majesty's Inspectorate was first established in 1839. The article describes how the inspectorate began its work; how, later on, a series of reviews and changes to legislation affected the exercise of its accountability and advisory functions; how qualitative judgements in inspection reports became codified over time; and how, in more recent times, inspection became more inclusive by involving practising teachers and managers as peer inspectors. The article ends with the new direction that is currently being taken in Wales.

Keywords: school inspectorates in England and Wales; accountability; school self-evaluation; peer inspection; Estyn

Introduction

In 2013, the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI) published the Bratislava Memorandum.¹ The Memorandum represented an attempt by over 30 European and other inspectorates to define and refine the functions of school inspection. While the memorandum captured a wide range of functions and duties that European inspectorates claimed for their school inspection systems, what it recognised but did not reconcile were the two key and seemingly opposing positions: the view of inspectors as 'watchdogs' or 'direct enforcers' of tick-box regulation and judgement as compared to a view of inspectors as 'helping to stimulate well-founded innovation' by making a 'catalytic and capacity-building contribution'.²

The history of inspection in England and Wales has been one that has veered, at various points, between the coercive and responsive, between the managerial and the collaborative. But inspection has always had at its heart the function of accountability, that is, of holding schools to account for the quality of the education they provide, for the outcomes of their learners and the value for money they deliver. A range of quantitative and qualitative metrics have been used for the purpose of analysing and reporting on schools and other providers. The publication of inspection reports (from 1983) made schools more directly accountable to parents and students but also served, because of that, to create a more high-stakes environment for schools. Publication of inspection reports meant that parents would be better informed about the choice of

school for their children, but the price of failure at inspection might also mean a loss of a school's reputation and fewer pupil admissions in consequence. And that would lead to less per-pupil funding as the number of admissions fell. In time, in England but not in Wales, failure at inspection would mean forcible removal from local authority control as so-called 'failing schools' were reborn as academies.

Over time, the balance between different approaches to inspection and to the two fundamentally opposing positions noted above has shifted in line with the prevailing ideology of politicians, at national and local levels, whose job it has been to fund and manage the education system, accountable as they are, in their turn, to the electorate.

The 2022 book *Watchdogs or Visionaries? Perspectives on the history of the education inspectorate in Wales*³ is relevant to the focus of the current issue of *FORUM*. For much of the last two centuries, Wales has shared the services of an 'England and Wales' inspectorate that was first established in 1839. While this article is not intended to rehearse the contents of the book, I do draw on some of its primary and secondary sources to offer an overview of how the inspectorate began; how a series of reviews and changes to legislation affected the exercise of its accountability and advisory functions; how qualitative judgements in inspection reports became codified over time; and how, in recent times, inspection became more inclusive by involving practising teachers and managers as peer inspectors. The article ends with the new direction that is currently being taken in Wales.

From the beginning

In the early Victorian period, the role of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) was to secure an efficient return on the government's investment in elementary education. Along with the increase in industrialisation during the period, there had emerged a need for a more literate, numerate and disciplined workforce. The government intervened to offer grants to schools that were intended to fulfil both the need to dispel ignorance among the so-called lower classes and the need to civilise what were seen as the more seditious elements in a rapidly changing society. Schools were expected to conform to state regulations and had to achieve HMI approval as a condition of grant. From the first instance, the judgement of inspectors had a direct impact on the amount of grant a school would receive and, if it was deemed inefficient, then a school might lose its grant altogether. The role of the inspectorate was therefore a powerful and influential one from its earliest existence.

Nevertheless, HMI were initially given guidance to cooperate with local arrangements for schooling and to be mainly supportive during their visits to schools. While they were to gather information for central government about the quality of instruction and the character and discipline of schools and might give advice, they were not to interfere

with the management of schools.

However, when Ralph Lingen, one of the authors of the excoriating *Blue Books* on the state of education in Wales in 1847,⁴ subsequently became secretary to the Committee of Council on Education he imposed a culture of narrow compliance on all HMI in England and Wales with the introduction of Robert Lowe's system of payment by results in 1862. From that point almost until the end of the century, HMI were the feared annual examiners of the level of pupils' narrowly defined achievement in the 'three Rs' and of schools' attendance rates. Their role throughout the period of payment by results was resented by many HMI, some of whom were openly critical of its failure to address the wider role of a more expansive curriculum beyond reading, writing and arithmetic.

After 1902 when local education authorities (LEAs) replaced school boards, central government devolved powers to LEAs for the administration of schools, and the punitive powers of HMI were reduced in that the inspectorial slide-rule of payment by results was overtaken by a more benign approach. The Board of Education proclaimed that HMI would now become 'ambassadors of technical competence and good will'.⁵ They still carried the aura of government authority but were to operate more by persuasion than punishment. The Board of Education guidance for inspectors in 1907 outlined the 'province' of the inspectorate as follows:

It is the special province of the central Authority, not merely to test the efficiency of all schools in respect of which it distributes Parliamentary Grants, but also and in particular to organise efficient sources of educational information, and to disseminate in convenient fashion results, criticisms and suggestions, derived from continuous recorded information of educational experiments and of the daily work of the various kinds of schools and teachers.⁶

The requirements to gather information, give assurance about value for money and to offer criticisms and suggestions on the basis of observation not only of routine work but also of 'educational experiments' would not be unfamiliar to the authors of the Bratislava Memorandum.

Abel Jones was appointed a junior inspector in Wales in 1910. He described his work as follows: 'Junior inspectors were expected ... to inspect schools for 10 half days each week ... After these inspections we would report on about one school in three, so that all schools would be reported upon once in three years.'⁷

Jones saw his work as an opportunity to influence practice in the classroom and commended a medical-style, diagnostic model for inspectors:

An inspector is a specialist and not a purveyor of patent medicines. He goes to the school, and after considering all the circumstances – the neighbourhood; the capacity of the children; the size of the classes; the qualities and qualifications of the

teachers; the amenities of the equipment and school buildings, etc., etc., etc. – he prescribes as a specialist the treatment he thinks best for that particular school. An experienced inspector feels that he is on safe ground when he follows this method.⁸

Reviews of the inspectorate

A series of select committee and independent reviews commissioned by the government after the Second World War resulted in many recommendations for inspectors. Overall, in these recommendations, the balance between accountability and advice tended to favour the advisory role. Typically, the Roseveare report of 1956 prioritised inspection visits and professional dialogue with teachers over the production of written reports, and this resulted in more pastoral visiting and a less frequent rate of reporting in the form of full or formal inspection (FI) reports.⁹

Pastoral visits would generate internal notes of visit that were not shared with schools, although there would be oral feedback to teachers and headteachers. And the circulation of FI reports was confined to local authorities, the Department of Education and Science (DES) and, normally, the senior staff of the schools involved.

In 1970, a DES publication noted that HMI should observe and assess the quality of education provision and provide constructive feedback based on their deep knowledge of how schools worked and what good practice looked like. They were expected also to advise the secretary of state and act as a link between government and local education authorities.¹⁰

The largely supportive Rayner review of 1982 reiterated the main functions of HMI as involving ‘a check on the use of public funds’; ‘provision of information to central government’; and ‘provision of advice to those responsible for running educational establishments’.¹¹

Despite being the subject of many government reviews, HMI were not always straightforward instruments of the state. Inspectors have always been proud of the claim that, like other civil servants, they are prepared to ‘speak truth to power’ in matters to do with education generally and with matters specific to the processes of policymaking. In *Watchdogs or Visionaries?* we look at the much-vaunted notion of the ‘independence’ of HMI. That independence is a matter of degree but has sometimes been a cause of tension with politicians.

One example of tension that eventually led to a significant change in legislation emerged during the 1980s, when the Thatcher government was becoming increasingly irritated both by HMI and teachers. As indicated above, the government had made school inspection reports public and available to parents for the first time in 1983 so that schools would be made more accountable. But by doing this they also made it easier to criticise weaknesses in government education policymaking, since the schools operated

within a government regulatory framework and were funded to deliver what became, after the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), a nationally prescribed curriculum (NC). HMI were pro-NC but sceptical about the introduction of standard assessment tests (SATs). For this, and other reasons, politicians began to characterise HMI as roadblocks to reform. Secretary of state for education Kenneth Baker (who introduced the ERA and the NC) saw HMI as the priesthood of a culture in the DES that was:

rooted in progressive orthodoxies, in egalitarianism and in the comprehensive school system. It [the agenda] was devoutly anti-excellence, anti-selection, and anti-market ... the interests of the producer [teachers] prevail over the interests of the consumer [parents and pupils]. [The DES was] in league with the teacher unions, University Departments of Education ... and local authorities ... Reports on schools were written with an opaque quality which defied any reader to judge whether the school being inspected was any good or not.¹²

Baker's view was shared by other cabinet ministers and it was education secretary Kenneth Clarke who brought in legislation to privatise the inspection of state schools in both England and Wales. His 1992 Education Act changed the landscape of school inspection, as a result of which:

- most school inspections were outsourced but monitored by HMI
- frameworks of guidance on inspection were published for the first time
- schools were inspected more regularly
- those schools deemed to be a 'cause for concern' were placed 'in special measures'.

A new chief inspector was appointed to head the office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (England), which was renamed Ofsted. In Wales, Roy James carried on as chief inspector in the parallel office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (Wales) where HMI came under a Welsh Office whose confidence in its chief inspector was undimmed. Whereas around a half of the HMI in England lost their jobs, only a handful of HMI in Wales were required to take early retirement as the new, contracted-out system of school inspection was introduced. The 1990s were difficult to manage as, in both England and Wales, HMI had to devise and implement new systems of training and regulating teams of independent school inspectors in short order.

Making judgements on schools

While HMI have never been mere regulators who secure compliance with a defined set of regulations, they were at their most constrained and working to a narrower remit during the period of payment by results than at any other time in their

history. Throughout their history, however, HMI have always been required to offer judgements. An informal four- or five-point scale of qualitative judgements was in use during the 19th century, and the use of words such as excellent, good, satisfactory, unsatisfactory or poor was not uncommon from the very beginning. Grey reports that ‘By 1882 HMIs in England were ... grading schools from excellent to good, fair, unsatisfactory and “bad”’.¹³

The practice of using a scale of judgements became embedded in the culture of HMI over time. For instance, in 1918, the district inspector for north Wales made a return to the office which classified 10 per cent of its schools as excellent (Class A), 40 per cent as good Class B), 40 per cent as satisfactory (Class C), and 10 per cent as defective or unsatisfactory (Class D). The full descriptors were as follows:

Class A – schools excellent.

Class B – schools good: normal: satisfactory all round work – generally progressive.

Class C – schools satisfactory in the sense that they are regularly conducted, and that HTs [headteachers] are faithful and reliable. But weak in methods, ideals and teaching needing constant nursing and guiding.

Class D – schools defective and unsatisfactory: in need of constant watching and calling for severe treatment.¹⁴

However, grades and descriptors were not to be fully and transparently codified for England and Wales until the 1990s. After the 1992 Education Act, published frameworks and detailed guidance for inspectors formalised a practice that was already common i.e. the classification of various aspects of a school’s standards, quality of provision and leadership according to whether expected criteria were being met or not, or exceeded. In the 1990s, judgements on schools were graded on a seven-point scale in England while, in Wales, a five-point scale was used. Increasingly, numbers (grades 1-5 in Wales and grades 1-7 in England) were being used instead of word judgements; the significance of the numbers being used was outlined in guidance to inspectors in England as follows: ‘Very good teaching is summarised as grades 1 and 2 on the 7-point scale; satisfactory or better as grades 1-4; and less than satisfactory as grades 5-7’.¹⁵ Detailed subsets of grades were captured on observation forms and school profiles etc. to compile a record of evidence that would feed into internal inspectorate databases. These databases would subsequently be used to inform annual reports, and they would be drawn upon to make comparisons on school inspections.

The publication of inspection grades in reports for parents was intended to inform them about the quality of local schools in order that they might choose the one most suited to their children. It had the effect, inevitably, of creating competition between schools, particularly between those with overlapping catchments where parental choice

could have a deleterious effect on pupil admissions and funding. Making schools more competitive was of course part of the intention. The idea was that the good schools would expand at the expense of the weaker ones, which would eventually close. This notion effectively dampened any enthusiasm for collaboration and joint professional learning between schools. It created a culture of high-stakes inspection that was perceived as punitive by schools themselves and by some academics working in the field of school improvement.

By the 21st century, while politicians were often still driving for greater accountability, academics and practitioners in education were developing a very different model of school improvement, one which was based on school self-evaluation and which did not need to involve external inspection at all. Much of the literature on self-improvement in this century argues that internal accountability is what drives improvement in schools. Michael Fullan has been among the many academics who promote internal school evaluation. Fullan was adviser to the school effectiveness framework that was introduced in Wales in 2008 by Steve Marshall, the highly respected educationalist who moved from Australia to lead on education in the Welsh Assembly government.¹⁶ Marshall was himself an inspection-sceptic and Fullan was critical of inspection as ‘a punitive regime’.¹⁷ They were both early promoters of school self-evaluation as, later on, was the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which published several reviews of Wales’s education policies (notably in 2014 and 2017) and also worked alongside Welsh government to promote school self-evaluation and its vision of schools as learning organisations.¹⁸

The increasing importance of internal self-evaluation as a driver of school improvement reflected the parallel emergence within UK inspectorates of mechanisms to secure a more inclusive approach to the process of external inspection. One such mechanism was the requirement for schools to produce self-evaluation reports that would be used as a starting point for external inspections.

Peer inspectors

Another mechanism to help school staff to drive their own school improvement involved including them more directly in the inspection process itself. Increasingly, inspection was being seen as something that would benefit from a more responsive collaboration between inspectors and those being inspected. In order to make school inspection teams more inclusive and to lessen the sense of ‘us and them’ during inspections, the inspectorate in Wales (by then entitled ‘Estyn’, Welsh for ‘to stretch’ or ‘extend’) introduced peer inspectors to every inspection team from 2004 onwards. Ofsted was to follow suit in 2012. Peer inspectors were (and are) generally leaders and managers from schools who are trained by the inspectorate to be full members of inspection teams and

work alongside inspectors. As part of this experience, peers gain a wider knowledge of the system and are given the opportunity to exercise skills of data analysis and classroom observation in schools other than their own. Peer inspection was intended to enable teachers and managers to hone those skills so that they could return to their schools with a more robust approach to self-scrutiny. The other main advantage of this new cooperation was in the ‘recent and relevant’ experience of working within the system that peer inspectors brought to inspection teams. Later on, when inspection teams also included a nominee from the school being inspected as a full team member, those nominees too found themselves in a position to inform debate directly in team meetings and gain an inside knowledge of the inspection process, including how and why the team reached its conclusions. In post-inspection action planning, these nominees would be pivotal to the interpretation of the ‘strengths’ and ‘areas for development’ identified during inspection, and their interpretation would inform subsequent school development plans.

Graham Donaldson, author of a 2018 review of the inspectorate in Wales, noted that: ‘the involvement of peer and lay inspectors, the introduction of a nominee from the school to participate in an inspection ... were all bold moves to open up inspection and encourage schools to engage more constructively with the process’.¹⁹

Criticism of inspection as too punitive would continue, however, despite the use of peers and Estyn’s inclusion of school nominees as full members of each inspection team.

A change of direction in Wales

In 2010, Estyn reduced the number of graded judgements being collected on each primary school inspection from over 700 per primary school inspection to 15. (Not all the 700+ grades were actually published, but rather they were used to feed databases for purposes of aggregation and comparison.) Reducing the number of grades being collected represented a significant change of direction, away from the false sense of security generated by the spurious assurance of large-scale statistical aggregation.

The publication of the Donaldson review in 2018 signalled a further shift, this time a move away from the use of summative grades or judgements altogether. Inspectors were in future to change from being predominantly managerial to becoming collaborators with schools as ‘learning organisations’ in the context of system-wide reform, centred on a new vision of a ‘Curriculum for Wales’. This is a vision that has a focus on the curriculum’s four purposes of ‘seeking to develop young people as: successful, capable learners; ethical, informed citizens; enterprising, creative contributors; and healthy, confident individuals’.²⁰

The shape of inspection in the future will need to be aligned with the four purposes, and current guidance for inspectors requires them to inspect: wellbeing and attitudes

to learning; teaching and learning experiences; care, support and guidance; and leadership and management.²¹ These themes will already be familiar to inspectors and schools, although the emphasis on wellbeing has been strengthened considerably compared with guidance in the past. However, the greatest change in direction, and to the whole culture of external evaluation or inspection, is in the complete absence of a scale of judgements. Inspectors currently only offer an overview of strengths and areas for development together with a set of recommendations. At present, Estyn stands alone among its neighbouring inspectorates in abjuring grades.

Conclusion

Over the period of almost two centuries of their existence, HMI have assumed many roles. They have been gatherers of information, regulators, examiners, auditors, mediators, arbitrators, watchdogs, critics, functionaries, advisers and visionaries. The balance of their roles has varied over time, and the style of inspection has also varied, from the coercive to the diagnostic and responsive. More recently in Wales, system-wide reform, centred on a new curriculum and recognising the importance of self-evaluation to school improvement, has made inspectors into more collaborative agents.

Ann Keane taught in secondary, further and higher education sectors, in England and Wales, before being appointed HMI in Wales in 1984. Since her retirement as chief inspector in 2015, she has edited and contributed to *Watchdogs or Visionaries? Perspectives on the History of the Education Inspectorate in Wales* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2022).

anndafiskeane@outlook.com

Notes

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