



National Education Trust



COUNTERBLASTS

Shouldn't Ofsted be helping us to improve our schools? by Geoff Barton

Shouldn't Ofsted be helping us to improve our schools?

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Beginnings

It is perhaps unthinkable to many of us in schools, but there was a time before Ofsted.

Edenic and mythical, it was an age when schools could do what schools were expected to do, free from the irksome intrusion of external scrutiny.

Those schools taught children, of course, and – except when halted by the vandalism of teachers' industrial action in the mid-'80s – they ran sports fixtures and put on concerts and plays. Thus parents, provided they liked what you did and approved of the ethos, would send their children to you.

It was an era before the heavy weight of school accountability systems was brought in – before performance tables, self-evaluation forms, and (cue ominous chord sequence) Ofsted inspections.

Depending on the shade of pink in your tinted spectacles, this was an age of enormous freedom and creativity, the main disadvantage of which was, perhaps, the potential for mediocrity to set in and to go unchallenged.

Because, truth be told, a school could coast for many years and, so long as the parents were happy, little happened. Challenge from beyond the

school gates, other than the fickleness of parental perception, was minimal. Provided the brightest students got to college and university, there was little way of judging whether lack of achievement by other students was attributable to background, culture, lack of ambition or – two words that were then rarely even muttered – bad teaching.

Mediocrity, like a fungal growth, could be spreading through the institution's nether regions, and the outside world – and most probably the inside world – would be none the wiser.

I started teaching in 1985 and remember feeling that I was being perceived as a bit odd, a bit freakish, when I wanted to look in detail at how the first cohort of KS4 students I taught had done in their 16+ exams (not that they were exams: it was 100% coursework then so I pretty much knew how they had done).

There wasn't – in my experience at least – that burning sense of being held accountable for the performance of your examination groups that now keeps many of our profession lying awake with worry in the early hours. Indeed, the very word 'performance' would be recognisable only to the drama department and its audiences, not to school managers. Its arrival as a term for talking about something as intangible as teaching felt brutish and mechanistic and alien.

That's not to say that there was no such thing as school inspection, but back then it was very different. A generation of young people could pass through a school before an inspection team, led by a member of Her Majesty's Inspectorate, might visit. Certainly, in my seven years' teaching in the pre-Ofsted era I never experienced a full school inspection, but school veterans would talk of them with a knowing glint of nostalgia and reverence that made them seem on a par with the Queen coming to distribute Maundy money to the masses. The ensuing reports were elegant and thoughtful and generally constructive. Meanwhile schools that weren't good enough would mostly go unchallenged.

It was on John Major's joyless watch that mounting concern about the lack of transparency about school standards translated into a desire to dismantle a system of inspection that was seen as too infrequent and far too cosy. An HMI working with local authority advisers was seen as too insular, too much a member of a gang of comrades basking together in education's secret garden. It was time to crack open the gates.

Thus the Education Act of 1992 ushered in an inspection regime that has now become an accepted, if often feared, feature of educational landscape. Despite its many reinventions, the Ofsted "brand" (as people in Ofsted seem to refer to it) has become a focal point of interest by other nationals and principalities hoping to lever up their own educational standards. Many of them want something similar.

So I happen to agree that something like Ofsted – something official, recognisable and firmly independent – is necessary to the system. We can't leave school quality to the equivalent of an educational Trip Advisor or Good Schools Guide, tempting as that may seem to some, because a sensible judgement about how a school is doing can only ultimately be made by taking a look inside. That's why I'm as sceptical of desk-bound long-distance inspection as I would be of a restaurant reviewer who judged the quality of an eating establishment simply by scrutinising the menu and wine-list on its website.

So I'm not one of the "let's scrap Ofsted" brigade. I'd definitely hang on to an organisation that has built up robust knowledge to make judgements about school quality, and I would want that expertise to apply to all schools, whether they are maintained or independent, academies, comprehensives or free schools. There should be no opting out, just as I'm reassured that every café, coffee shop and restaurant is subject to public health inspections, not just the unhappy few.

I am therefore arguing that every school – however well its exam results suggest that it may be performing to the remote observer –

should be inspected once per generation of students – i.e. every five years. And, at the risk of over-baking my food analogy, this is because I don't believe that a school which was last judged to be outstanding two or three or more years ago will necessarily be the same now, even if its headline results look good. Isn't it just the same with a Michelin-starred restaurant? Shouldn't it be subject to regular re-inspection rather than the lazy assumption that the same chef and same kitchen and front-of-house team have maintained identical standards for the past decade?

So that's our starting point: that the education system needs Ofsted in some guise or other. And we know that Ofsted is high profile – a well-known brand, almost, one suspects, as recognisable to parents as M&S or Tesco.

But I also wonder if – unlike M&S and Tesco – it's missed an opportunity to update itself, to reflect the significant changes in school ambition, practice and leadership, and whether Ofsted is now looking just a little out of place in the modern educational world.

The need for reinvention

Although Ofsted has reinvented itself a few times since its inception – indeed, it’s been in and out of the dressing-up cupboard more times than Mr Benn – isn’t it still a bit like the uncle from the 1970s who still insists on turning up at family gatherings wearing his platform shoes and white one-piece suit? Has it failed somewhat to move with the times, to accept that the world of schools (and the various other institutions it inspects) has changed pretty radically, and has it become an enormous beast that’s out of control?

Take the figures from Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector, Christine Gilbert’s, final report, published in November 2010:

“In 2009/10, Ofsted’s inspectors carried out over 31,500 inspections, including inspections of:

- nearly 20,000 childcare and early education providers
- over 6,000 maintained schools and 300 independent schools
- nearly 2,000 children’s homes, and 138 adoption agencies and fostering services
- 119 local authority child protection contact, referral and assessment services”

The problem is that Ofsted reinvents itself more often than Madonna, sometimes driven by the changing whim of the political climate and sometimes by cost-cutting. Thus in September 2009, as Christine Gilbert’s report puts it, “after wide-ranging consultation and an 18-month trial period involving over 400 schools in pilot inspections” the one-day “drive thru” inspections were ditched and two-day inspections became the norm again.

From January 2012 the latest incarnation will come into force with, we are told, much more emphasis on watching lessons being taught and a focus on nitty-gritty issues, such as whole-school literacy

and the quality of marking. There will also be considerable inspection of “behaviour”.

At the same time Ofsted is having to reduce its costs further. Here is the ambitious programme set out in their Strategic Plan 2011–15:

We will take action to achieve better value for money over the next four years in line with the requirements of the Comprehensive Spending Review 2010. We will make reductions in our expenditure from £185 million in 2010–11 to £143 million by 2014–15. The budget will be reduced gradually over a four-year period:

2010–11 baseline	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15
£185m	£176m	£167m	£160m	£143m

I am certainly not qualified to judge whether this expenditure represents value for money for the country as a whole, but there is an important question which I think we should all feel entitled to raise: has education got better as a result of Ofsted? Is teaching better now than in, say, 1992 when Ofsted was founded, and how far is there a link between the inception of Ofsted and the quality of what happens in the classroom?

Has Ofsted helped us to do things better – crucially, to teach better? Because if we’ve got better despite Ofsted, then that’s a lot of money to have spent on a sprawling organisation that ought to be helping to inform us systematically about what works and what doesn’t.

And here I think we begin to see a fundamental problem with the Ofsted mentality, which views its inspectors as akin to judges in the Eurovision Song Contest. They watch and they make a judgement, and then they lament that not enough teaching is outstanding.

Take these two paragraphs from HMCI’s 2010 report:

“Teaching is judged outstanding overall in only 5% of primary schools and 4% of secondary schools. However, evidence from lesson observations shows that outstanding teaching is taking place even

in some schools where the overall teaching and learning judgement may be lower.

“The key features of outstanding teaching differ very little between phases and types of school. Teaching is most effective when teachers have high expectations and excellent subject knowledge, and build positive relationships with pupils. Teachers use lively examples and introduce relevant contexts that bring the subject to life. There is a varied and effective mix of practical, oral, written and group work, and technology is used imaginatively to develop learning. Work is carefully matched to pupils’ abilities and prior knowledge so that pupils build their skills and understanding. Teachers assess their progress carefully. Open and challenging questions extend pupils’ reasoning and vocabulary and help them to become enthusiastic and self-motivated learners, eager to contribute and share their ideas. At its very best, such teaching generates an infectious enthusiasm for learning.”

The report identifies what outstanding teaching looks like but laments the absence of it in so many classrooms.

The judgement of “quality” in teaching and learning

I wonder, however, whether this may be telling us more about Ofsted than about the actual state of teaching in our schools. Because what Ofsted does is to develop a “house style” when it comes to judging teaching. Currently, and for the past few years, this has meant looking for tangible evidence of students’ progress which, on the face of it, doesn’t seem a bad idea.

The problem is that short windows of lesson observation – often around twenty minutes at a time – aren’t necessarily ideally suited to students demonstrating progress.

Here’s what I mean: a few years ago, as part of a review of teaching in PE, I walked into a lesson in which the teacher was teaching a group of Year 9 boys how to improve their basketball skills. When I walked in they were playing basketball. It was all orderly and purposeful, but it was hard to know how much the students had learnt or were learning. Then the teacher paused the lesson. He sat the students down and asked them to talk about the lesson objective, what they understood by it, and what they had done so far that demonstrated that they were learning and applying the skills outlined at the outset. It was impressive – pedagogically and tactically. I say “tactically” because whilst the brief review session in the lesson may well have been in the interests of the students, it may also have been that this veteran teacher was playing the game. He was stopping the lesson in order to visibly demonstrate students’ progress. He knew that if the lesson was to be judged good or outstanding, then progress must be witnessed. And that’s what the Ofsted house style does: it creates perverse incentives to teach and lead schools in ways that conform to a particular world-view.

In reality, learning is a messy business in which progress may not only be invisible, but where students may well be regressing. They