



Leading education
and social research
Institute of Education
University of London

June 2014

Accountability and school inspections

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Introduction: the purpose of school inspection

'Raising standards, improving lives' has been Ofsted's strap line for some time. The strategic plan for 2011-15 specifies this vision in four priorities and indicates a focus on improvement of outcomes for learners of all ages, and a strong focus on underperforming schools.¹ Recent debates in the media, however, indicate some concerns about Ofsted's impact on the improvement of schools.² Variability in the quality of inspection teams, the reliability of inspection judgments, the tight inspection framework which leaves little room for innovation and the high stakes context that motivates teaching to inspection standards and manipulation of inspection data are some of the issues being raised. The aim of sustained and continuous improvement of all schools through inspections is widely supported, but if and how this aim is achieved is strongly contested. We review the international evidence to highlight key considerations for any inspection system, as well as the specific issue of the degree of fit between Ofsted frameworks and the wider direction of schools policy.

What research tells us about Ofsted's impact

Research reviewed from England indicates the powerful influence of Ofsted on schools' actions, but whether this influence is overall positive or negative depends on the type of school inspected and the quality of inspections.

Impact on student achievement

Hussain's and Allen and Burgess' sophisticated analyses of large, longitudinal datasets indicate a link between the findings of an inspection report and student achievement results. They suggest that a negative inspection judgement may prompt or accelerate actions to improve student performance, even where no external interventions are made.³ Other studies from Shaw *et al.*, Harris and Chapman, and Rosenthal, however, show no relation between inspections and student

¹ Ofsted (2011), [Strategic Plan 2011-15](#), London: Ofsted.

² e.g. *Guardian* (2013), ['The future of Ofsted: where next for school inspection?'](#).

³ Hussain, I. (2012), ['Subjective performance evaluation in the public sector: evidence from school inspections'](#), University of Sussex - unpublished manuscript. Allen, R. and Burgess, S. (2012), ['How should we treat under-performing schools? A regression discontinuity analysis of school inspections in England'](#), Centre for Market and Public Organisation Working Paper No. 12/287.

achievement, or even a decline in student achievement results after inspection visits.⁴ These inconclusive findings can be explained by the different research methodologies used to look at links between inspection and student achievement and different timeframes,⁵ as well as changes in Ofsted's approach to the inspection of schools. There is, then, no clear picture of the impact of school inspections on student achievement, whether the impact is similar across the system or perhaps different for schools in different contexts or at different ends of the performance spectrum.

Changes in teaching and organisation of the school

Qualitative studies by Courtney, Dougill *et al.*, Baxter and Clarke, and Tymms and Jones (in prep)⁶ indicate that headteachers from schools that were inspected in the year before they were surveyed focus more on inspection framework priority areas and on improving their capacity-building and school organisation compared to headteachers who were inspected a longer time ago. Jones and Tymms also report of teachers teaching to the test and to inspection criteria, and of head teachers who narrow the curriculum and teaching in order to meet the Ofsted framework.⁷ Analysis by Francis using data from all inspections showed that particularly in areas where children faced multiple disadvantages schools often failed to improve from one inspection to another.⁸ These schools received 'satisfactory' ratings in two successive inspections with 'satisfactory' capacity to improve. Francis comments that although Ofsted reports highlight what needs to be done, there is little guidance on how to do it. Ofsted's latest annual report on the other hand indicates that, overall, schools and colleges across the country are performing better than a year ago. According to Ofsted, more focused inspections and the changing of the 'satisfactory' grading to 'requires improvement' has resulted in over 90% of schools judged as

⁴ Shaw, I., Newton, P. D., Aitkin, M. and Darnell, R. (2003), Do OFSTED Inspections of Secondary Schools Make a Difference to GCSE Results? *British Educational Research Journal*, 29 (1), pp.63. Harris, A. and Chapman, C. (2004), Improving Schools in Difficult Contexts: towards a differentiated approach. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 52 (4), pp.417-431. Rosenthal, L. (2004), Do School Inspections Improve School Quality? Ofsted Inspections and School Examination Results in the UK, *Economics of Education Review*, 23 (2), pp.143-151.

⁵ A recent EU comparative study (co-ordinated by Ehren, see www.schoolinspections.eu) shows different effects across countries which reflect differences in the introduction of inspection systems, but also indicate that changes in schools are, on the one hand, related to the timing of the inspection visit, and, on the other, include a general effect that is caused by the presence of inspection systems (e.g. inspection frameworks and the knowledge of potentially being inspected in the near future). Current research does not allow us to paint a clear pattern of impact yet.

⁶ Courtney, S. J. (2012), [Ofsted's revised school inspection framework: experiences and implications](#). Paper presented at BERA conference, Manchester. Dougill, P. R., Blatchford, R., Fryer, L., Robinson, C. and Richmond, J. (2011), *To the next level: good schools becoming outstanding*. Reading: CfBT Education Trust. Baxter, J. and Clarke, J. (2013), Farewell to the tick box inspector? Ofsted and the changing regime of school inspection in England, *Oxford Review of Education*, 39 (5), pp.702-718.

⁷ Jones, K. and Tymms, P. (accepted), Ofsted's role in promoting school improvement: The mechanisms of the school inspection system in England, *Oxford Review of Education* (see also <http://schoolinspections.eu/england/conceptual-model/>).

⁸ Francis, B. (2011), [\(Un\)satisfactory? Enhancing life chances by improving 'satisfactory' schools](#), London: RSA.

requiring improvement to make satisfactory progress in remedying their weaknesses.⁹

Other themes in studies about Ofsted concern the variability in the quality of inspectors and the implications of inspection outcomes for headteachers' careers. Courtney,¹⁰ for example, argues that insufficient consideration is given in inspections to the contexts and challenges facing schools serving areas of disadvantage, and that this may make it more difficult to recruit headteachers for such schools. Courtney's findings about variability in the quality of inspectors may be a consequence of changes to the framework, which purports to give greater weight to the professional judgement of inspectors; the implications of this are discussed further by Baxter and Clarke,¹¹ who draw on interviews with members of inspectorates and other relevant bodies in participating countries carried out as part of the *Governing by Inspection* project.¹² The skills of contracted inspectors have been questioned¹³ and in May 2014 Ofsted announced it would be cutting its ties with outsourcing companies such as CfBT, Serco and Tribal and bringing school and college inspections in-house from next year – giving it more direct control over their selection, training and quality assurance.¹⁴

International evidence about effective school inspections

Recent reviews from Klerks¹⁵ and Nelson and Ehren¹⁶ indicate that the positive impact of inspections can be found in four areas:

- improvement/introduction of school self-evaluation;
- behavioural change of teachers (and school leaders) to improve effective school and teaching conditions;
- student achievement results.

As Nelson and Ehren note, inspection *may* have an impact on any or all of the above, but this is not necessarily the case. Where accountability systems that include inspection have been in place for a lengthy period, annual reports and evaluations from or on behalf of inspectorates show that schools are improving overall. Interventions in place in these systems ensure that those schools which perform very poorly will either improve, with the extensive support provided, or be closed down. However, although they do not sink into the category where they are

⁹ Ofsted (2013), [Annual Report 2012/13: Schools](#), London: Ofsted.

¹⁰ Ibid 6.

¹¹ Ibid 6.

¹² Grek, S., Lawn, M., Ozga, J. and Segerholm, C. (2013), Governing by inspection? European inspectorates and the creation of a European education policy space, *Comparative Education*, 49 (4), pp.486-502.

¹³ e.g. BBC news, ['Ofsted inspectors 'lack key skills' required for job'](#), 17th March 2014.

¹⁴ Ofsted, ['Ofsted announces plans to bring management of all school and further education inspections in-house'](#), 29th May 2014.

¹⁵ Klerks, M. (2013), [The effect of school inspections: a systematic review](#), paper presented at the ORD, Wageningen, The Netherlands, 20-22 June 2012.

¹⁶ Nelson, R. and Ehren, M. (2014), [Review and synthesis of evidence on the \(mechanisms of\) impact of school inspections](#), commissioned by the Dutch Inspectorate of Education to inform their strategy development 'Toezicht 2020'.

judged to be failing to provide an adequate quality of education, some schools in these jurisdictions remain 'stuck' or 'coasting'. As for the research on Ofsted, the wider evidence suggests that such schools tend to serve areas of disadvantage. Research on the factors which link inspection to impact is complicated both by the position of inspection within an accountability framework, which may include national testing and school self-evaluation and by numerous other variables. As well as positive effects, research shows that inspection, as part of a high stakes external accountability system, may have unintended negative consequences.

Factors identified in the literature that lead to inspection having more or less (positive and/or negative) impact include the quality of feedback; whether or not inspection reports, test results and league tables are published; the presence or not of parental choice; the quality of school leadership and school capacity to improve; and the strength of sanctions and support. Another factor is norm-setting around inspection standards (including 'performativity'). Norm-setting here refers to the mechanisms in which schools demonstrate, through documentation and pedagogy that they are meeting the expectations of inspectors; it links to concerns about 'gaming' where schools 'brush up' or manipulate behavior they have to report on to receive a more positive assessment.¹⁷

High quality feedback to schools, and how feedback is provided, is important if the feedback is to lead to improvement in student outcomes. Arguments for the publication of inspection reports and/or 'league tables' of pupil performance data are that parents will use these to select schools for their children and that the publication of a negative report will stimulate lower-performing schools to improve.¹⁸ However, research evidence from the Netherlands¹⁹ and England²⁰ shows that parents rarely use published information as the primary motive for their choice of school. The majority of research on the impact of league tables shows negative effects, such as a narrowing of the curriculum, focusing on particular groups of pupils or teaching to the test.²¹ A recent study by Ehren et al (submitted) suggests that inspection in six European countries (including England) primarily drives change indirectly, through encouraging certain developmental processes, rather than through more direct coercive methods. Inspectorates that set clear expectations and standards on good

¹⁷ de Wolf, I. F. and Janssens, F. J. G. (2007), Effects and side effects of inspections and accountability in education: an overview of empirical studies, *Oxford Review of Education*, 33 (3), pp.379-396.

¹⁸ Ibid. See also, Ozga, J. (2013), Accountability as a policy technology: accounting for education performance in Europe, *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 79 (2), pp.292-309.

¹⁹ Ibid 17. See also, Denessen, E., Driessen, G. and Slegers, P. (2005), Segregation by choice? A study of group-specific reasons for school choice, *Journal of Education Policy*, 20 (3), pp.347-368. Koning, P. and Wiel, K. V. d. (2013), Ranking the schools: how school-quality information affects school choice in the Netherlands, *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 11 (2), pp.466.

²⁰ IpsosMori (2008), *School inspections - final report 2008*, London: Ofsted.

²¹ Whitby, K. (2010), *School inspections: recent experiences in high performing education Systems*, Reading: CfBT Education Trust. Wiggins, A. and Tymms, P. (2002), Dysfunctional effects of league tables: a comparison between English and Scottish primary schools, *Public Money and Management*, 22 (1), pp.43-48. Ehren, M. and Swanborn, M. (2012), Strategic Data Use of Schools in Accountability Systems, *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 23 (2), pp.257-280.

education have a distinct impact on the improvement of self-evaluation in schools and on the improvement of capacity-building in the school.

Some studies also suggest that sanctions and rewards have a positive effect on educational quality in schools. The operating assumption in these studies is that schools work harder to perform well when something valuable is to be gained or lost; information and feedback alone is seen as insufficient to motivate schools to perform to high standards.²² Responses to inspection tend to be most focused and effective where funding is at stake or exposure is higher.²³ Formal sanctions, such as forced reconstitution of consistently low performing schools, were more likely to promote responses than just embarrassment from grading schools and reporting results publicly. They may cause schools to be more aware of inspection standards, and force them to comply to those standards. However, Elmore and Fuhrman²⁴ also describe how schools operating under severe sanctions in high-stakes test based accountability systems do not appear to be making fundamental changes in their core processes. Instead, they seem to place considerable emphasis on test preparation and make quick-fix solutions which lead to rapid improvement on the accountability measures. Some of these schools may incorporate structural changes but few appear to be making extensive or deep efforts to rethink their instructional programmes.

Changing landscapes

The limited and sometimes negative impact of centralized reforms and accountability structures has in many countries led to changes in how they are trying to improve their education systems. Education reforms are moving away from standard-based centralized improvement to strengthening decentralized local networks of schools that exchange knowledge about effective practices and support each other in finding and developing innovative solutions for complex educational problems.²⁵ The purpose of strong local networks is to enhance innovation and generate system-wide improvement (what the McKinsey report frames as moving 'from good to great'²⁶). In England, national strategies for school improvement are being abandoned and the school system is being restructured to focus on improvement driven by schools themselves.

These structures for localized school-to-school evaluation and improvement have many consequences for the role of school inspections. The current accountability framework in England is focused on individual schools: performance tables assess

²² e.g. Elmore, R. and Fuhrman, S. (2001), *Holding Schools Accountable: Is It Working?*, Phi Delta Kappan, 83 (1), pp.67-70.

²³ Matthews, P. and Sammons, P. (2004), *Improvement through Inspection: An Evaluation of the Impact of Ofsted's Work*, London: Institute of Education.

²⁴ Ibid 22.

²⁵ e.g. Hooge, E., Burns, T. and Wilkoszewski, H. (2012), *Looking Beyond the Numbers: Stakeholders and Multiple School Accountability*, OECD Education Working Papers, No. 85, OECD Publishing; Hargreaves, D. (2012), [A self-improving school system: towards maturity](#), Wolfson College, Cambridge, Nottingham: NCSL.

²⁶ Mourshed, M., Chijioko, C. and Barber, M. (2010), [How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better](#), McKinsey & Company.

the performance of each school separately and Ofsted still largely reports on individual schools.

This centralized top-down approach does not sit well with the aim to promote more localized processes of change and innovation where stakeholders work together in strong supportive and high-trust networks to define the problems they need to solve (e.g. low student achievement in a particular area), and trial and test solutions for these problems with all stakeholders involved.²⁷ On the contrary, such centralized approaches enhance and legitimize a 'one size fits all' strategy for success to national standards, encourage risk averse behaviour in schools and window-dressing of successful rituals. In performing for inspectors, management and staff become adept at disguising the real problems and issues that face the school. This can mean that these issues do not get the attention and support they require. Moreover, inspection feedback is often distant (in time) from the behaviour the feedback is related to and, therefore, does not contribute to the trialling and testing of new solutions.

Conclusion: enhancing Ofsted's impact

A change in Ofsted's role and working methods is, therefore, needed to improve their impact on school improvement, and enhance their fit within the overall education system. Inspection roles and frameworks need to be revised to encourage localized decision-making and local structures and networks for improvement. Inspections need to assess a school's involvement in partnership working to promote learning, and to inspect all schools who are working in a federation, chain or school improvement partnership at the same time.²⁸ Frameworks need to evaluate and assess the quality and functioning of chains of schools, with the purpose of validating and supporting improvement at the local level. Examples of such approaches include:

- The agenda (e.g. standards) for inspection is (also) set by schools and stakeholders with the purpose of analyzing, validating and disseminating good practices (describing why the good practice worked for the host school, how the host school created process knowledge – 'this is how we did it' – and making explicit the theory underpinning practice – 'these are the principles underpinning why we did it and what we did').
- Inspection frameworks include standards on effective cooperation between schools/stakeholders, such as local authority school improvement teams.
- The inspection schedule includes visits to all schools/stakeholders in the cluster at the same time.
- Inspection feedback is given to all schools/stakeholders in an open forum and agreements are made to create a shared agenda for change.

²⁷ See, for example, Gilbert, C. (2012), [Towards a self-improving system: the role of school accountability](#), NCSL.

²⁸ See, for example, Hargreaves, D. (2011), [Leading a self-improving school system](#), Nottingham: NCSL.

- inspection frameworks take into account the socio-economic context within which schools work, ending the one-size-fits-all approach.

Examples of such school inspections are currently being implemented and tested in small scale settings in the Netherlands and Northern Ireland.

In the Netherlands, a new vision for more differentiated inspections ('Toezicht 2020') is being developed which specifically aims to include local stakeholders and local information systems in the inspection data collection. The Dutch Inspectorate of Education aims to (more) purposefully build on local self and peer evaluation structures, both on the school governing board and at school level. These developments have been instigated by changes in legislation which require a set of schools to work in partnerships to provide inclusive education for all children (including children with disabilities) under 76 new (primary) education authorities. Each new education authority now governs a set of regular and special needs primary schools and has to ensure smooth cooperation between these schools in the provision of care and high quality education to each individual pupil. As a result, the Inspectorate of Education now needs to inspect the quality and functioning of chains of schools. A new inspection framework, ('toezichtkader voor samenwerkingsverbanden'; 'inspection framework for cooperative chains'), describing the quality of partnerships of schools and additional sanctions for educational authorities in charge of partnerships of schools, has been developed for this purpose.

In Northern Ireland, schools have been working in networks for some time now and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) has developed area-based evaluations to support the work of such networks. An example of such a network is the West Belfast Partnership Board's Education and Training forum. They have initiated a strategic networked alliance, called the Area Learning Community (ALC), consisting of all post primary school principals and all relevant educational stakeholders, including the ETI. These principals and their stakeholders have agreed on protocols for sharing performance data and school to school support, aligned to and agreed upon with the district inspector. The central question underlying these protocols, school-to-school support and district inspections are 'How do we improve the quality of education not only in individual schools but for the entire community?' Both the work of the ALC, as well as area-based inspections and inspection reports have this question as their starting point. These specific approaches however still need to be evaluated on their merits.

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