



School Inspection in a Self-Improving System: Changing dynamics and reinventing roles

Symposium Report

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UCL Institute of Education

Overview:

Recent policies have seen a move away from central reforms to bottom-up improvement of schools. Joint improvement and practice development of networks of schools is the most recent reform model developed in a number of countries across Europe. In England this model has been coined as the 'self-improving system', taking up David Hargreaves' ideas of school-led improvement, system leadership, teaching schools and national and local leaders of education. These system-wide changes in how schools deliver and improve their education have great consequences for the role, responsibilities and working methods of Inspectorates of Education. In this symposium, hosted by the London Centre for Leadership in Learning, UCL Institute of Education examples of school inspection models that fit this changing polycentric context were presented. The symposium highlighted recent insights from a comparative EU-study, coordinated by Dr Melanie Ehren from the Institute of Education, looking into the impact of these newer 'polycentric school inspections'. The symposium provided a platform for key decision-makers and researchers in the field of school inspection and evaluation to exchange ideas and discuss strategies to promote the positive impact of school inspection in England in the most cost effective way.

Chaired by Professor Peter Earley, the first session had three speakers based at the UCL Institute of Education. These three speakers then responded to questions taken from the floor.

First session: UCL Institute of Education speakers

Dr. Melanie Ehren, UCL Institute of Education

Setting the stage: polycentric school inspections and their mechanisms of change

The building blocks of a self-improving system (Hargreaves) were outlined; these are:

- Clusters of schools (structure)
- The local solutions approach and co-construction (culture)
- System leaders (key people)

The introduction in England, in recent years, of National, Local and subject or specialized leaders of education, Teaching School Alliances and Academy Chains has created a diverse education system which has many different ways of supporting and structuring school improvement.

These changes have led to a "polycentric system"; in such a system, there are many centres of decision making that are formally independent of each other. National government and other stakeholders in the system, such as schools, networks of schools and their governing bodies operate in complex and interdependent relations that change continuously, and where the state is not the sole locus of authority. Such a system, it is argued, demands a need to adapt accountability to the local context and for a system that is able to adapt itself. This will need to be a more responsive system, less centralized and with no single regulator.

Two key questions were asked about this emerging system:

*What is the role of Inspectorates of Education in a self-improving education system?
How can inspections be effective in enhancing school-to-school (networked) improvement and evaluation?*

Aspects that form part of this new polycentric system of inspections include:

- Where the agenda (e.g. standards) for inspection is (also) set by schools and stakeholders
- inspection framework includes standards to evaluate network activities, effective cooperation, and/or meso/macro-level issues
- inspection schedules include visits to all schools/stakeholders at the same time
- inspection feedback is given to all schools/stakeholders; feedback is targeted to, and adapted to relevant actors
- intelligent consequences (e.g. information sharing, persuasion, targeted monitoring)

Examples were given from three countries that form part of an ongoing EU funded project mapping models of inspection and good practice. In England, while Ofsted continues to focus on inspecting individual schools, it has added 'batch' inspections, where inspections are carried out over a short period of time to cover a number of schools within an Academy chain. Regional Schools Commissioners are beginning to play another important role in evaluating Academies, often exercising 'soft intelligence' to monitor performance of academies and their trusts.

In Northern Ireland, area based inspections evaluate and report on the quality of provision directly or evaluate the quality of support services in a geographical area, across a number of phases.

In Netherlands, schools are required to cooperate in networks to provide inclusive education so that each student with special education needs becomes the responsibility of the whole network. Inspections of these networks evaluate the cooperation between schools in the network and visits to schools in the network are informed by early warning analysis which include indicators on the performance of the network, such as the number of students in an area who are not in school.

Lessons for England from these examples include: the need to shift from school accountability to accountability of networks and their governing bodies; focus on local (school and network-level) issues, and effectiveness of cooperation in the network and using intelligent alignment of different evaluation and accountability arrangements, such as RSC, Ofsted, performance tables, peer review and self-evaluations to monitor academy chains, federations, teaching school alliances and other relevant networks in the system.

Prof. Toby Greany, UCL Institute of Education
School inspections in a self-improving system: some dilemmas and opportunities in the English context

Greany started by referring to the 'eight pillars-and one foundation-of greatness' (Husbands, 2013). These are: shared vision, values and culture; world class teaching and learning; exceptional CPD in a professional learning community; effective leadership; stimulating and inclusive environment; broad and balanced curriculum; high quality partnerships; and rigorous self-evaluation and review. Greany adds the foundation of evidence informed practice under these eight pillars. In a summary of the plethora of initiatives and reforms over the last three decades, he concludes that the top-down model of reform has become increasingly limited. He adds to this the international debate about preparing children for the globalised world. Highlighting the coalition government's principal policy document on education, "The Importance of Teaching", Greany pointed out that references to the 'Self Improving System' were very few, compared to the large prevalence of statements in relation to Academies and Free Schools. Drawing on this policy document, as well as Goldacre's report for the Government, four criteria for a self-improving system were stated:

1. Teachers and schools are responsible for their own improvement
2. Teachers and schools learn from each other and from research so that effective practice spreads
3. The best schools and leaders extend their reach across other schools so that all schools improve
4. Government intervention and support is minimised

Alongside this, Greany highlighted four narratives about the self-improving system:

1. The world class (no excuses) approach ['raise your game or face the consequences']
2. The freedom to teach approach ['we do trust you']
3. The market based approach ['choice and competition']
4. The system leadership approach ['the strong will lead us upwards']

He points out that the first three narratives (above) do not encourage teachers or schools to learn from each other and that the danger in the present system is that the weak will get weaker and the strong, stronger. Referring to Hargreaves' maturity matrix, Joint Practice Development suggests that there is a need to develop a moral purpose and a high level of trust; for this reason peer review should play a key role. In the current context, Ofsted can be seen to be fighting a rear guard, offering a traditional system of accountability that focus too heavily on individual schools. However, as other agencies (BECTA/NCSL) fall away, Ofsted has become 'the only game in town'; alongside this are the ever more serious concerns about the reliability of its judgements. Greany suggests a litmus test – if, as Ofsted has suggested in its most recent annual report, that schools have improved in recent years, how will this be reflected in the next round of international comparisons, such as PIRLS, TIMMS and PISA?

Prof. Dan Gibton, Tel-Aviv University and UCL Institute of Education **The legislative context of ‘polycentric inspections’**

Professor Gibton began by referring (ironically) to the ‘wealth’ of educational legislation in England. He suggested that England was ‘leading the world’ in terms of (the sheer quantity) of such legislation and posed the possibility that this was due to a Government in which “we legislate because we can”, quoting one Senior MP. A few choice examples:

1988 Education Reform Act
1993 Education Act
1996 Education Act
1997 Education Act
1997 DfEE white paper “Excellence in Schools”
1998 Standards & Frameworks Act (SSFA) (& Circular 10/99 “Social Inclusion – Pupil Support”).
Education Act, 2002
Children Act, 2004
Higher Standards, Better Schools for All: More choice for parents and pupils (White Paper 10/05)
Education and Inspections Act 2006 (key legislation that brought together previous legislation on inspection)
Academies Act, 2010
The Importance of Teaching – White Paper 2010
Education Act, 2011.

Legislation on inspection has been noted as early as 1872 in Germany. Gibton noted that the word ‘supervision’ rarely occurs in the English legal context in relation to Inspection.

Gibton drew on knowledge gained from his own longitudinal research on policy makers in education that began in 2001, during which he has interviewed 136 influential figures, including senior members of Ofsted, CEOs and Directors of LAs; MPs; legal advisors to the Government; ‘Super Heads’, heads of QUANGOs and think-tanks and senior academics.

Some overall conclusions from this research:

The English system is over-legislated but under-regulated. The use of legislation as a policy tool has been much over-used in England.

The ability of Ofsted to capture some of the subtleties that mark out high quality schools from others was questioned by one senior DfE person who just this year remarked that, “if you are a KS4 school and you are in the top quartile pupils in prior attainment, you have a 90% chance to be good or outstanding”.

Q&A and Discussion from session 1:

Four themes were raised here:

- 1) The value of an independent inspectorate to report back, without fear, to Government, evaluating its policies
- 2) Whether Ofsted should give grades
- 3) Whether Inspection and school improvement were considered compatible
- 4) How Ofsted should work with networks to set the agenda for inspection

Panel responses:

Regarding the first point; Ofsted needs to look carefully at the reliability and validity of its own measures, otherwise it will not be able to evaluate policies effectively.

In terms of whether grades should be given; the most important issue here, is to remove the fear in such a high stakes system. Grades, alongside constructive feedback do have the potential to lead to improvement but high stakes can lead to short term gaming and other consequences.

Many are questioning the role of Ofsted in terms of school improvement, however we would need to evaluate the risk of moving away from the current model and a strong argument would be needed to replace it with peer review or other approaches.

Evaluating networks and having them set their own agenda is tricky when using one central framework, however one option is for schools to suggest one priority area in particular schools, or in a locality (or network) to be *added* to the visit. However, a high stakes context is likely to stifle such attempts, making the 'additional' area an issue of peripheral concern.

Session 2: Guest speakers

David Crossley, Learn2Transform Ltd

The Whole Education Peer Review and the relation to Ofsted inspections

David Crossley introduced his talk by voicing an over-riding concern in the current English context about 'soft accountability' living alongside the fear of statutory accountability. He felt that much had been done so far in England to raise the floor standard, especially through school to school improvement initiatives but more was now needed to 'raise the ceiling'. Within this, he urged a professional sense of purpose that would not require legislation. Thus, the peer review system introduced by Whole Education was not a 'mocksted' but an entirely separate process. Part of this involved the training of leaders in peer review accreditation which began with reviewing their own school. Within the peer review model they use, self-assessment was very important, as it formed the basis for dialogue on the day of the visit. Crossley stressed the importance of language, peer review was not 'inspection' and they did not award grades, rather stages were referred to: Aspiring; Emerging; Impacting and sustaining; Transforming and inspiring differentiated judgements from peer reviews.

Crossley compared Whole Education's model to one developed by Peterborough Local Authority, designed to create a self-improving system. This has been strongly informed by the Whole Education process:

- Heads work in triads and visit each others' school each term to an agreed agenda and process and then work together in a collaborative of approximately 9 schools.
- The emphasis then shifts from diagnosis to school improvement activities.
- Each collaborative is led by a lead head teacher who applied and is paid for their coordinating work.
- They attend and are the majority on the LA's new school improvement board which includes representatives of the LA and the cabinet member for education.

David Crossley ended by suggesting three key principles:

- Build on what is good
- Create and foster an energising and positive culture
- Build professional accountability

Matthew Purves, Ofsted
Head of Education Inspection Reform
Inspection of groups of schools in LAs and in MATs

Two key reforms are taking place at Ofsted. One is the introduction of a common framework for all early years' settings on the Early Years Register, maintained schools and academies, non-association independent schools and further education (FE) and skills providers. The second is short inspections for maintained schools, academies and FE and skills providers that were judged 'good' at their last full inspection. These short inspections are to be conducted approximately every three years and are designed to make a single overall judgement which confirms whether the provider remains 'good', rather than making a range of individual judgements.

Ofsted's current inspection of groups of schools comes in two forms: inspections of schools which are part of multi-academy trusts (MATs) and groups of local authority schools. At present, such inspections are conducted on the basis of a risk assessment. Ofsted does not aim to cover all chains of schools or local authorities in this way. The current political context was not encouraging for further development of these arrangements. Purves referred to the recent example of schools in Reading, where a sample of ten schools was inspected and the leaders of the other schools in the area were surveyed.

These inspections looked at standards in the individual schools visited, but also looked at the overarching central support for school improvement provided (in this case) by the local authority. Strengths and weaknesses in this central school improvement support are diagnosed and reported on but not graded (for example, a lack of challenge for schools that were not achieving good rates of progress for some or all groups of pupils). Feedback to networks is in the form of a letter, rather than a full report, and 'intelligent consequences' were applied.

Ofsted has no preferred system of governance or networking. Instead, judgements are always made in relation to the standards of education and safeguarding in the individual schools which make up the group.

Frank Green CBE, National Schools Commissioner, Department for Education Inspection and intervention in academies and free schools

Frank Green started by explaining the role of the Schools Commissioner, which is to encourage and nurture the sponsorship of academies and free schools. The National Schools Commissioner (NSC) oversees and line manages the eight regions, (three in London) covered by Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs). Another aspect of the Commissioner's role was to encourage school to school collaboration and support. Green sees his desired overall 'direction of travel' as involving:

- i) School to school support and challenge
- ii) A self-improving system, including governance at the level of trusts, sponsors, regions and Teaching School Alliances
- iii) Working to improve opportunities and achievement for all children

In the current system, RSCs monitor performance (without inspecting) and their chief aim is to remove 'special measures' (SM) and 'requires improvement' (RI) schools out of the system. One mechanism for this is to 're-broker' academies, of which 27 have occurred this year. RI schools are given 'advice' from RSCs whereas SM schools are compelled to change within a short time frame. Good and Outstanding schools are encouraged to build up and add further schools. One aspect of the system that Green supports is for excellent school leaders to be able to run more than one school. Indeed, he cites evidence that 30% of Head Teachers are outstanding, so the logic that each of these should run three schools, is compelling, in his view.

At present there are 4,783 academies and free schools in England, which accounts for 40% of the workforce (not 40% of schools but these tend to be bigger than average schools so the workforce accounts for more). Green cites research by Robert Hill (2012) that indicates the remarkable success of Academy schools so far. The political direction of travel is unlikely to change in this regard, with Labour also supporting MATs.

In terms of inspections, Green suggest that Ofsted would not be best placed to inspect at the level of the Multi Academy Trusts because they do not have the expertise to look at governance- neither should they inspect Local Authorities in this sense. However, he has no objection to Ofsted conducting batch inspections. On a personal level, Green agrees with Deming's assessment that you "cannot inspect quality into anything", questioning the role of Ofsted in school improvement. He supports the peer review process, at least among Good and Outstanding schools.

The supervisory authority of the RSC comes from the funding agreement that it has with the Secretary of State. The audits they conduct with Academies and Trusts cover a range of issues, beyond funding, including a commentary on what the organisation has done and what it is intending to do. An internal review can usefully form the basis for this audit.

Q&A and Discussion from session 2:

1) The future direction, in terms of marrying together inspection and improvement

Responses included the suggestion that Inspections should not grade, rather make a judgement on whether a school is good enough or not good enough. Improvement should be based more on a peer review process that could be usefully moderated by an HMI. The two elements should be separate with separate aims (accountability for inspections and improvement for peer review).

This issue is already being addressed to an extent in the new framework. Thus, schools that are good or outstanding will now only face light touch inspections, more rigorous ones for grades 3 and 4.

2) The value in Ofsted moderating a school's journey from good to outstanding

One response was that schools should be trusted to raise the ceiling themselves and that this need not be externally guided. Furthermore, peer review as a process does not have to involve Ofsted; good governance should include challenge and build this in.

However, it was also pointed out that schools themselves value the outstanding grade and those above the threshold may become complacent and not engaged as fully in peer and self-evaluation without the involvement of an external inspectorate in this.

3) Ofsted's role in identifying system leaders

The role of an 'outstanding' judgement by Ofsted in identifying system leaders (e.g. SLEs) is questionable, since these aspects of leadership are not specifically part of a framework that looks at the quality of leadership of an individual school. As it is, the Lead school in a Teaching School Alliance puts forward its proposed SLEs and these are validated by the National College, so this is one without the need for Ofsted's involvement.

Concluding comments

Prof. Peter Earley then invited Sir George Berwick and Peter Matthews to make some concluding points and to reflect on the day:

The debate about the role of Ofsted can be both emotional and logical. There is also an international perspective, as schools can be more readily compared on international measures. Clearly leadership at Government level has led to too much fluctuation caused by its power to initiate sweeping reforms. There was a suggestion that Ofsted inputs and outputs are too variable (and open to manipulation and gaming) for these to be used by Government to make accurate judgements.

The suggestion was made that the failure to grade lessons* is eroding the evidence on which to judge the quality of teaching and learning. If Ofsted is to get involved in judging Multi Academy Chains this is problematic, as the evidence becomes increasingly less first hand and is thus a very different exercise to inspecting a single school. It was further argued that we are also losing clarity about the independence of Ofsted; the website has merged with the cross-government Gov.uk site, for instance. Is Ofsted a measure of the state or a lever of the state?

On these questions the symposium ended and we look forward to hosting the next one in 2016.

* Ofsted has subsequently clarified that it has stopped making judgements about teaching in individual lessons under the new framework, although inspectors continue to visit lessons, conduct joint observations with school leaders and grade teaching over time by a combination of lesson observation, marking and progress.