

Embracing complexity

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Embracing complexity: rethinking education inspection in England

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical paper provides valuable insights into the ongoing debates on OfSTED's fitness for purpose and effectiveness. It critically examines the current education inspection system in England through the lens of complexity theory. The paper begins with a review of significant changes in the system from 2019 to the present, explaining that education inspection, as a complex system, is characterised by path-dependence, self-organisation, co-evolution, emergence, interdependence and adaptability. This is followed by a comprehensive discussion concerning the underlying power dynamics contributing to the gradual lock-in of the inspection system over the past three decades. Furthermore, it evaluates whether the system has reached a tipping point, potentially transitioning towards a new era. The complexity theory equips change agents, policymakers, policy implementers and school practitioners with a useful theoretical framework to navigate the landscape of educational inspection and facilitate meaningful changes. For change agents to embrace complexity thinking when envisioning a new inspection system, this paper presents several recommendations: surveying the evolving landscape and collecting new evidence, benchmarking against other inspection systems, balancing the power dynamic between OfSTED and schools and paying switching costs while incentivising change adopters.

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Introduction

In September 2019, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OfSTED) launched a new Education Inspection Framework (OfSTED, 2019). Half a year later, inspections were suspended due to Covid-19 (OfSTED, 2020). While schools were still affected by the pandemic, a phased return to inspections began in September 2020. One year later, all routine inspections were resumed (OfSTED, 2021). Due to changes in focus and data collection methods in the new inspection framework, the previously exempt 3,900 "Outstanding" schools are now scheduled for re-inspection from November 2021 to 2025. About 1,900 schools no longer hold the "Outstanding" rating

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under the new framework. Meanwhile, an additional 1,500 schools became “Outstanding” (OfSTED, 2022a). OfSTED used these results to emphasise the importance of regular inspections, highlighting that school performance could decline if they were exempt from inspection for an extended period of time.

An upgrade or downgrade in inspection results can significantly impact the well-being of school leaders and teachers. In January 2023, Ruth Perry, a primary school headteacher in Reading, tragically committed suicide following her school’s downgrade from “Outstanding” to “Inadequate”. This heartbreaking incident triggered a chain reaction among various teachers’ and headteachers’ unions (Fazackerley, 2023; Jeffreys & George, 2023; Weale, 2023). The National Education Union (NEU) (2023) presented a *Replace OfSTED* petition, accusing OfSTED of issuing unreliable judgments, exhibiting bias against schools in disadvantaged areas, undermining the competence of school leaders, lacking relevant frontline experience, skills or qualifications and causing unnecessary workload, pressure and stress. In response to Ruth Perry’s passing, both His Majesty’s Chief Inspector (HMCI) Amanda Spielman and Education Secretary Gillian Keegan defended the one-word inspection rating system, asserting its importance in helping parents select schools (Callery, 2023). Their defence further infuriated the unions. The NEU, National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) urged schools to boycott inspections and advised free-lancing OfSTED inspectors to refrain from inspecting schools (Henshaw, 2023). Supporting the unions, the Shadow Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, said that schools deserved better “than a system that is high stakes for staff, but low information for parents”; the Labour Party would consider using a report card to replace the one-word ratings in inspections (Adams, 2023a; Walker, 2023a). Chaired by Lord Jim Knight, a new inquiry called *Beyond OfSTED* was launched to propose better alternative inspection approaches (Beyond Ofsted, 2023). In June 2023, Ruth Perry’s school was re-inspected, and this time, its overall effectiveness was upgraded to “Good” (Adams, 2023b). Drawing on regulations 28 and 29 of the Coroners (Investigations) Regulations 2013, Heidi Connor, Senior Coroner for Berkshire, concluded that Ruth Perry’s suicide was “contributed to by an OfSTED inspection carried out in November 2022” (Connor, 2023, sec. 3). Connor urges OfSTED, the Department for Education and the Reading Borough Council to provide a detailed response and timetable by February 7th, 2024, outlining the actions taken or planned to prevent future deaths (Connor, 2023; Walker, 2023e). In response to the inquest report, OfSTED required lead inspectors to take emergency training. This training focused on identifying physical signs of heightened anxiety and stress among school leaders and staff, such as “difficult to concentrate”, “speech rapid or mumbled” and “perspiring” (Walker, 2023d, fig. 1). Moreover, lead inspectors were advised to contact OfSTED’s helpdesk and request a pause of inspection should they identify a high-risk situation (Walker, 2023c). OfSTED’s adoption of these reactive measures suggests negligence in addressing inspection-induced fear over the past 30 years. They only began addressing the issue when faced with a suicide investigation and subsequent inquest.

Amid the ongoing debates about OfSTED’s fitness for purpose and effectiveness, this paper employs complexity theory to critically examine why OfSTED has evolved into a rigid, powerful regime and how to lead meaningful changes if we envision a more humane, just and reliable inspection system in England.

This paper answers the following research questions:

- (1) What constitutes a complex inspection system in England?
- (2) How do the underlying power dynamics lock the education inspection system in?
- (3) How to strategize for a new education inspection system?

OfSTED: an unhappy 30th anniversary

Since its establishment in 1992, OfSTED has diligently “orbited the sun” for over 30 years. However, instead of sending waves of happy birthday wishes, school leaders and teachers voluntarily contributed over 3,237 anonymous entries about their recent OfSTED experiences through a Twitter (now known as X) survey (Ofsted Experiences (Responses), 2023). After obtaining permission from the survey initiator, I conducted a keyword analysis of these entries. The findings revealed the most commonly shared feelings among school leaders and staff regarding OfSTED: pressure (mentioned 621 times), stress (607), tears (253), fear (252), anxiety (244), awful (227), stressful (212), sick (217) and rude (164). Interestingly, the 10th keyword, happy, appeared 155 times. A closer examination of the entries containing this keyword reveals that respondents did not describe their encounters with inspectors as “happy”; rather, they emphasised how their happiness was destroyed. For instance, entry 692 says *“perfectly safe, happy, comforting settings are left to be destroyed”*. Entry 542 indicates that inspection makes inspectors happy at the cost of school staff’s happiness: *“Our school day is frantic with panic and box ticking to make them happy rather than thinking about the children. Ofsted is soul destroying”*. Entry 452 shows inspection failed to offer constructive feedback for improvement: *“I’m happy to improve my practice, but I need to know how”*.

One caveat could be that this survey was launched shortly after Ruth Perry’s passing, potentially influencing respondents to emphasise the negative aspects of OfSTED inspections as a display of solidarity with Ruth Perry. In this openly accessible dataset, respondents also noted instances of positive inspection experiences and commended several inspectors. However, the number of these positive encounters is notably smaller in comparison to the negative ones. Openly expressing dissatisfaction with OfSTED can be perceived as obstructing inspections and could result in punitive consequences for both individuals and schools. The anonymity of this survey protected the respondents, enabling them to freely share unfiltered views on OfSTED. Below are a few examples of their experiences.

Overdue Ofsted (last done 2011). Had 6 weeks of mock inspections and “reviews”. Management in fear. Won’t accept it has anything to do with them. It’s chaos. (Entry 55)

It always makes me think – it’s the luck of the draw on which inspector you get and of course your grading is already decided before they walk through the door. (Entry 74)

In search of the golden OfSTED judgement I’d been pressured to be complicit in engineering a situation where there were no disruptive pupils, and behaviour was outstanding. (Entry 388)

These real-life inspection experiences starkly deviate from OfSTED’s mission, which centres on raising standards and improving lives. Unintended consequences have arisen from the interactions among various agents within the education inspection system. To comprehend how this occurred, complexity theory provides a valuable analytical framework.

Education inspection as a complex system

OfSTED positions itself as an independent non-ministerial agency, reporting directly to Parliament. However, previous studies have shown that it operates as a *de facto* inspection regime characterised by panoptic performativity, punitive measures and authoritarian surveillance (Baxter, 2014; Bokhove & Sims, 2021; Courtney, 2016; Perryman, 2006; Perryman et al., 2018). Figure 1 depicts the various agents and policies constituting the education inspection system in England. Notably, this is a simplified abstraction of real-world inspections. It is constructed to illustrate apparent relationships between agents for analytical purposes. However, it does not and cannot capture all the ever-evolving macroscopic and microscopic properties of the system.

First and foremost, educational inspection operates as an open system in which various agents – inspectors, schools, parents, teachers’ unions, education policymakers and implementers – exchange information and engage in self-organised interactions among themselves, independent of external control (Turner & Baker, 2019). Some interactions adhere to established rules outlined in the *Education Act 2005* and OfSTED inspection frameworks and handbooks, while others evolve organically, adapting to the dynamic environment. Over time, the system displays new properties and orders that cannot be simply derived from its original components. In essence, the entirety of the system is greater than the total sum of its individual parts. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as emergence (Morrison, 2008; Turner & Baker, 2019). An example of emergence is evident in schools utilising consultancy firms and mock inspections to prepare for evaluations, despite being instructed not to undertake specific preparations. Schools have learned to purchase and exchange information about specific inspectors’ personalities and their preferred data collection methods, aiming to appease inspectors and secure favourable inspection results (Tian, 2023). This exchange of information and resources among agents has given rise to a new market selling inspection solutions within the inspection system.

When interconnected agents impact one another in an open system, they generate higher-order effects that cannot be entirely predicted or controlled (Boulton et al., 2015). Meanwhile, faced with a vast amount of information, each agent uses imperfect knowledge to make choices and decisions. These agents, whether individually or collectively, co-evolve with the system, potentially adapting their agendas, beliefs and preferences over time. The following two examples illustrate the interdependence and adaptability features. Researchers, after analysing 30,000 school inspections conducted between 2011 and 2019, discovered differences in judgments between Her/His Majesty’s Inspectors (HMIs) and OfSTED Inspectors (OIs) (Bokhove et al., 2023; Jerrim et al., 2023a). When assessing primary and secondary school effectiveness, HMIs appeared harsher than OIs. Additionally, male inspectors seemed more lenient than their female counterparts. Subsequently, these research findings began influencing the behaviours and judgments of both HMIs and OIs. In attempting to counteract the biases highlighted in the study, inspectors might consciously adjust their judgments in the opposite direction, inadvertently creating new forms of bias.

Another study indicates that schools employing OIs are more likely to receive an “Outstanding” (20% compared to 7% for schools without OIs) or a “Good” rating (71% versus 69%). Moreover, they are significantly less likely to receive an “Inadequate” or “Requires

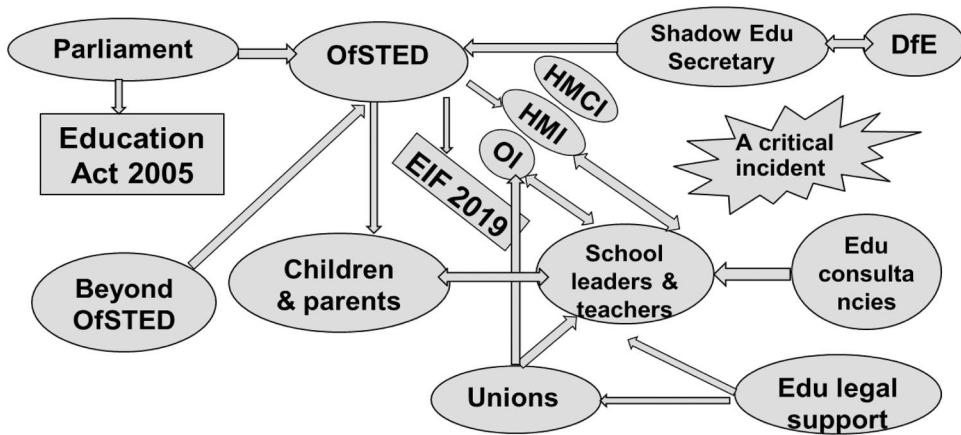


Figure 1. Education inspection as a complex system with constituent agents and policies

improvement” result (8% versus 24%) (Jerrim et al., 2023b). This research finding has the potential to influence school recruitment strategies as well as the professional development plans of school leaders and teachers. In these examples, interdependent agents rely on old behavioural patterns when interacting with each other. Simultaneously, they may alter these patterns for the future, using newly acquired knowledge about the old patterns.

In summary, education inspection in England represents a complex system wherein interdependent agents exchange information and resources in a self-organised manner. These agents learn, adapt and co-evolve with the system, utilising information acquired from and feeding new information into the system (Davis, 2008). Initial conditions, history and the sequence of events have established a path, impacting the future development of the system. This concept is commonly known as path dependence (Boulton et al., 2015). For example, inspections in England have been established as a high-stakes system, and this will persist unless deliberate efforts are made to disrupt this pattern. Although path dependence can influence the future to a certain extent, unexpected invaders may emerge and challenge the status quo due to the system’s openness. Given these inherent characteristics, addressing challenges faced by the current inspection system necessitates complexity thinking. This implies that superficial changes – such as removing a few problematic inspectors, altering inspection frameworks or increasing inspector training – will prove inadequate if we leave the underlying power dynamics of a complex system unexamined (Biesta, 2010).

Underlying power dynamics in education inspection

In addition to inspecting “services providing education and skills for learners of all ages”, OfSTED’s remit expanded in 2007 to include inspecting and regulating “services that care for children and young people” (OfSTED, 2022b, para. 1). This extension of OfSTED’s regulatory power coincided with the accelerated process of education privatisation since 2000, both aimed at “improving pupil performance and breaking the cycle of low expectations” (Carvel, 2000, para. 6). As of 2022–2023, 41.6% of schools in England were academies,

educating 54.4% of pupils (Haves, 2023). Various types of schools, including maintained schools, academies, Multi-Academy Trust schools and independent schools, contribute to the increasing complexity of the system. This complexity manifests in the school leadership structure, governance, curriculum and autonomy over finance and staffing. Interestingly, as more agents join the system, inspection practices have become increasingly rigid. As a statutory regulator without any competitors, OfSTED has gained more power over others, gradually locking the system in. There are a few reasons contributing to the system lock-in.

Complexity reduction

When dealing with increasingly diverse schools, OfSTED employs a strategy of complexity reduction. According to Biesta (2010), this reduction involves limiting options-for-action and controlling the feedback loop. For instance, inspectors routinely visit schools, assessing their effectiveness on a reduced four-point scale (Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement, Inadequate). Schools that excel in inspections often attract better teachers and gain more trust from parents and the local community, while those performing poorly tend to lose these key resources. Inspection results can magnify a school's advantages or disadvantages, creating a positive feedback loop. In rare cases, schools that received top inspection grades lost their best teachers to other schools, diminishing the possibility of achieving an "Outstanding" rating again. This talent flight exemplifies a negative feedback loop within the complex system (Russell, 2022). Over time, despite diverse practices, schools learn to exhibit similar characteristics in front of inspectors and employ similar micropolitical strategies to advance their agenda (Tian, 2023). This explains the phenomenon of why schools recruiting OIs tend to outperform others in inspections. OIs understand what "looks good – and what hoops schools need to jump through – to get a top inspection grade" (Jerrim et al., 2023b, para. 17). Paradoxically, the reduction of complexity erodes schools' capacity to provide culturally and individually-responsive education to learners.

This raises the question, "who actually benefits from complexity reduction?" (Biesta, 2010, p. 9) Agents in a complex system rely on feedback loops to adjust their actions and reactions. Their willingness to compromise for the common good is influenced by whether these agents share a sense of community and base their decisions on shared moral responsibilities (Boulton et al., 2015). Otherwise, agents may act solely out of self-interest, leading the most powerful agent to employ the complexity reduction strategy to gain more control and power over others. In England, the definition and measurement of effectiveness are predominantly controlled by OfSTED, resulting in an imbalanced power relationship between OfSTED and other agents. When these power dynamics become deeply entrenched, other agents will find it difficult to challenge the most powerful agent and envision a different inspection system. Even during a pandemic, OfSTED only temporarily suspended inspections before reinstating them (Henshaw, 2021). From a complexivist perspective, the phenomenon wherein a system rooted in the past evolves into a self-sustaining entity, thereby reducing the possibilities of alternative solutions, is referred to as lock-in. Once lock-in occurs, OfSTED, as the most powerful agent, becomes reluctant to innovate from within. Despite their desire to exert control over other agents through complexity reduction, OfSTED will not be able to control the

entire complex system due to the system's inherent characteristics of interdependence, self-organisation and emergence. Boulton et al. (2015) suggest two potential outcomes for a locked-in system: The system may require powerful interventions to tip it into a new era, or it may collapse towards the end of its life cycle.

High switching costs

Morrison (2008) argues that agents are reluctant to depart from old patterns unless better, cost-effective alternatives are available. The transition to a new inspection system entails not only financial expenses but also procedural, cognitive, psychological and relational costs. In a complex system, unpredictability and uncertainty make it impossible to precisely estimate these switching costs. Furthermore, the uneven distribution of imperfect knowledge across the system complicates the buy-in process. Both the Conservative and Labour Parties have expressed concerns about current inspection practices. The incoming HMCI, Sir Martyn Oliver, intends to invite more leaders from schools, trade unions and professional bodies to become inspectors (Walker, 2023c). Parliament's education committee plans to canvass parents' and teachers' views on inspection (Editorial, 2023). However, it remains unclear how these initiatives will be resourced and sustained until meaningful changes are implemented. Previously, ministers' dismissive attitude towards teacher shortage in England has strained the relationship between the government and schools. This distrust among agents will inevitably result in higher procedural, financial, psychological and relational costs when establishing a new inspection system.

Policy enforcement and legal consequences

The *Education Act 2005* sections 5 and 8 mandate the Chief Inspector to carry out graded and ungraded inspections and report results in writing (Education Act, 2005). Section 10 guarantees the Chief Inspector the power of entry. Deliberately obstructing inspection is considered an offense. Any individual found guilty of deliberately obstructing an inspection faces a potential fine of up to £2,500 and a criminal record for breaching the law (Edapt, 2023). The term "intentionally obstruct inspection" suggests that the disruption need not be physical or successful; merely intending to impede an inspection constitutes an offense, regardless of the outcome. Edapt (2003), a legal support agency, advises headteachers against declaring any intentions on social media that might raise OfSTED's suspicions of obstructing an inspection. Schools can request a deferral, pause or cancellation of an inspection only under "exceptional circumstances". However, such requests are often denied if teaching and learning activities continue on the school premises (Sommerlad, 2023). This policy enforcement and its legal consequences effectively discourage school staff from raising concerns about inspections, let alone proposing alternative inspection approaches.

Obsession about data, standards and measurement

With the help of the internet and big data, measuring, ranking and publicising school performance have become easier than ever before. The current inspection system creates the impression that a set of detailed standards and criteria can scientifically evaluate school effectiveness, almost as if schools function like machines. The OfSTED mantra of

“raising standards, improving lives” echoes this notion that “if we tell people exactly what to do and check they do it exactly, then standards and efficiency will improve” (Boulton, 2016, para. 2).

Another often-cited argument by OfSTED and the Department for Education is that parents rely on one-word ratings and reports to choose schools (Callery, 2023). Over the last three decades, parents’ resistance has emerged as a significant factor contributing to the system lock-in (Cecere et al., 2014). This resistance is underpinned by several reasons, including the beliefs that a flawed inspection system is better than no inspection at all and schools require ongoing monitoring to ensure the delivery of high-quality education. Additionally, there is a belief that despite its imperfections, if inspection has historically served its purpose, it should continue to be effective in the future.

People holding this obsession about data, standards and measurement might not realise that inspection is high-inference by nature. During lesson observations and subject deep-dives, inspectors heavily rely on their professional expertise and contextual knowledge to interpret school practices. While these high-inference observations empower inspectors to exercise professional judgment, they also heighten the potential for personal biases. A critique of the current Education Inspection Framework centres on potential discrepancies in how inspectors assess the intent, implementation and impact of school curricula (Tian, 2023). Furthermore, the link between inspection results and school performance data appears weak (C. Turner, 2023), suggesting inspection is high-inference by nature.

OfSTED’s self-revitalisation

In their 2022–2027 strategy, *Evolution and Improvement*, OfSTED declares itself to be “a force for improvement”, yet it explicitly states that it does “not, nor seeks to be, an ‘improvement agency’” (OfSTED, 2022c, p. 5). This stance echoes several anonymous Twitter survey entries. Teachers often recounted instances where inspectors told them to improve without providing guidance on how to improve their work (Ofsted Experiences (Responses), 2023). As a key agent in the inspection system, OfSTED has launched a series of incremental changes to revitalise itself. These incremental changes include introducing various inspection frameworks and handbooks, using a leaner inspection model to reduce inspection costs, changing evidence collection methods and continuously recruiting and training new inspectors. These incremental changes serve a dual purpose: Firstly, they convey the impression that OfSTED is introspective and forward-thinking, signalling an innovative spirit. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, they act as distractions to keep other agents busy with their ever-evolving inspection demands. This strategic manoeuvre contributes to the system lock-in, offering just enough variation between continuity and adaptation.

However, this self-revitalisation strategy does not shield the system from external invaders. A critical incident, an innovator, new ideas or novel technologies can breach established patterns, collapse the system or tip it into a new era (Boulton et al., 2015). Following Ruth Perry’s passing, there has been an ongoing re-evaluation of inspection practices. New agents such as the Beyond OfSTED team and other researchers have been collecting evidence and proposing alternative approaches for future inspections. These “invaders”, if successful, could collapse the existing system, paving the way for a new era. Other factors

in the larger society may also invade the current patterns, such as the upcoming UK general election, the shifting demographics and the changing labour market. Furthermore, beyond these observable external factors lie the realm of “unknown unknowns”. Unforeseeable and unimaginable factors beyond our current scope of anticipation may surprise us. As the future is beyond our control, conducting regular reviews of the evolving landscape and remaining alert to both expected and unexpected changes play a crucial role in strategizing for a new inspection system.

Strategizing for a new inspection system

According to complexity theory, there are multiple pathways leading to the future. Some agents may prefer a more gradual approach to reviewing and improving the current inspection system. In contrast, other agents who have experienced more adverse effects of inspections may advocate for a more radical revolution of the system or even its abolition. It is important to acknowledge that the future is shaped, not determined, by history, context and current patterns of relationships. Simultaneously, particular events and the sequence of these events have the potential to disrupt the system in various ways: (a) tipping it into a new era, (b) collapsing the system entirely, or (c) causing temporary fluctuations before returning to the status quo. Unfortunately, neither a “silver bullet” approach such as introducing a single intervention nor a “blueprint” approach including making detailed step-by-step planning can optimise or future-proof the system. Fortunately, the future is not entirely random either. The value of complexity thinking lies in the middle ground, “between finding what works and yet catalysing innovation and change, between intention and responsiveness, between foresighting and dealing with what is, between persistence and agility” (Boulton et al., 2015, p. 167). Meaningful changes are catalysed “in webs of relationships” (Mason, 2016, p. 439).

Surveying the evolving landscape and collecting new evidence

Though the future is unpredictable, it does not mean that agents should wait and passively accept whatever comes their way. To strategize for meaningful changes, the first step is to analyse the context and gather new evidence, paying special attention to the evidence that challenges deep-rooted beliefs. For example, is OfSTED truly a critical friend to schools? The findings of the 2023 *Working in Schools* report revealed that when their schools were anticipating an inspection, 64% of teachers felt exhausted after work. Inspections are correlated with several factors that diminish teachers’ job satisfaction, such as reduced involvement in decision-making, less control over working hours, weaker support from line managers and increased difficulty in taking time off (Felstead et al., 2023).

Do inspection reports provide accurate insights into school curriculum? A recent OfSTED report reveals the frequency of inspections across various subjects. Reading (100% in primary schools and 86% in secondary schools), Mathematics (97% in primary and 77% in secondary), History (46% in primary, 55% in secondary) and Science (23% in primary and 60% in secondary) underwent frequent scrutiny during subject deep-dives. Conversely, subjects like Music (9% in primary and 8% in secondary), Computing (8% in primary and 7% in secondary), Religious Education (5% in primary and 5% in

secondary) and Design and Technology (5% in primary and 18% in secondary) received significantly less attention from inspectors (Walker, 2023b). The current inspection practice suggests that only a limited range of subjects are prioritised during the two-day inspection, which makes the judgement on the overall breadth and balance of the curriculum questionable. Lyons (2023) also argues that in recent years, inspection has become more rigid. Many inspectors merely implement the HMCI's view on education and mechanically test students' memories and other performances as informed by cognitive science.

Do parents rely on OfSTED reports to learn about school performance? ParentKind (2023) published a report encompassing responses from 819 parents with school-aged children in England. The results indicate that 85.54% of parents want information about school inspections. A majority (61.96%) of parents believe inspections should be conducted by an independent body. However, 39.34% of parents do not read their school's most current OfSTED reports and 59.04% do not find these reports useful. More concerning is that 76.4% of parents doubt the accuracy of these reports in assessing a school's performance. Apart from the evaluation on the school curriculum, which is considered important by 60% of parents, OfSTED does not provide information on other crucial factors valued by parents, such as school reputation (43%), ease of travel (39%), other parents' views on the school (35%) and extra-curricular activities (28%). An overwhelming 83.81% of parents advocate for "Requires Improvement" and "Inadequate" schools to have a chance to resolve identified issues. This is echoed by 70.06% of parents who believe schools should be given three months to rectify problems and be re-inspected before the final report is published. A majority (65.04%) of parents consider safeguarding highly important and suggest inspections should occur every 1–2 years. However, most parents do not want safeguarding to be a punitive determinant that prevents schools from achieving "Good" or "Outstanding" ratings. Instead, 78.21% of parents support a separate safeguarding inspection that does not contribute to the overall OfSTED rating (Parentkind, 2023). These findings provide intriguing insights into parents' attitudes regarding OfSTED. Many parents agree that OfSTED's reductionist view of school performance fails to accurately reflect complex practices, and most evaluation results appear punitive rather than developmental.

Do students believe they receive better education because of OfSTED inspections? A group of 12 students from London embarked on a project to review current inspection practices. They pointed out that a two-day inspection was too short to be meaningful or valid. Survey findings revealed that 88% of teachers and 84% of students tend to change behaviours under the scrutiny of inspectors. By the end of the project, these students concluded that "OfSTED as an entity does more harm than good" (Shahbaz & Perez, 2023, para. 5). The aforementioned findings have challenged some beliefs about the rigour and effectiveness of the current inspection practices. As the review work progresses, new evidence will emerge, requiring change agents to recalibrate the direction of travel. This also implies that detailed planning might not be effective when navigating a complex system. Instead, taking small steps, constantly reviewing progress and allowing a degree of flexibility are better approaches.

Benchmarking against other inspection systems

Concurrently, studying how other education systems conduct inspections may illuminate potential pathways forward. Similar to OfSTED, Education Scotland (2018) is an executive agency inspecting education and care providers in Scotland using quality indicators outlined in sector-specific quality frameworks. In contrast to OfSTED, education inspections in Scotland prioritise schools' self-evaluation and the dialogue between inspectors and practitioners. Education Scotland follows a sampling method, examining 120 schools annually rather than a cyclical model (Education Scotland, 2022). Prior to the inspection, headteachers conduct school self-evaluation using the *How good is our school* framework. This self-evaluation serves as the starting point for inspection in which schools can identify key themes for development and discuss them with the inspectors. Schools are rated against a six-point scale (i.e. Excellent, Very good, Good, Satisfactory, Weak and Unsatisfactory) and inspection results inform schools' continuous improvement, school-to-school learning and the National Improvement Framework (Education Scotland, 2023).

Estyn, the Welsh education and training inspectorate, has replaced the grading system with detailed inspection reports for schools and summary reports for parents (Estyn, 2023b). Similar to the practice in Scotland, inspections in Wales begin with providers' self-identified improvement priorities highlighted in the self-evaluation. The inspection team comprises a reporting inspector, team inspectors, peer inspectors, lay inspectors (for maintained schools), premises inspectors (for independent schools) and a nominee from the inspected school, offering various specialist and non-specialist perspectives. After the inspection, providers complete a post-inspection questionnaire to quality assure inspection work. As required by the *Education Act 2005*, Estyn must intervene with special measures or significant improvement follow-up activities if schools and pupil referral units cause serious concerns. Underperforming providers that do not fall into the above two statutory categories undergo an Estyn Review within 12–18 months to verify progress on highlighted issues (Estyn, 2023a).

To make meaningful changes to the inspection system, a fundamental consideration revolves around whether inspections should be high-stakes or low-stakes, with the former aiming at accountability and the latter at fostering development. Interestingly, when OfSTED was established in 1992, its primary purpose was to inform parents and other stakeholders as well as to provide recommendations to schools. Schools, on the other hand, were not expected to "slavishly accept them all" (Richards, 2023, p. 10). These boundaries have been breached over the past 30 years as OfSTED has become increasingly authoritative and inspections more high-stakes. What OfSTED can potentially learn from their counterparts in Scotland and Wales is reducing the high-stakes nature of inspections by replacing the one-word headline grading with a more informative report. The grading scale, being a reductionist tool, oversimplifies complex educational activities, thereby distorting and undermining the educational progress it aims to monitor (Donaldson, 2018).

Another comparative study examining inspection systems in the Netherlands, England, Sweden, Ireland, (Styria in) Austria and the Czech Republic reveals that high-stakes inspections, exemplified by OfSTED in England, can result in a notable increase in workload and distress among teachers and leaders. While high-stakes inspection might appear to better

enhance school performance, such improvement is gauged solely on schools' adherence to OfSTED standards rather than addressing genuine developmental needs (Ehren et al., 2015). Consequently, school self-evaluation becomes another tool primarily geared towards appeasing inspectors and showcasing compliance (Tian, 2023). This highlights the second lesson that OfSTED could potentially learn from other systems: utilising school self-evaluation as a starting point to customise the inspection process, foster professional dialogues and facilitate cross-pollination of ideas. However, achieving this is easier said than done. The most crucial step for both inspectors and school practitioners is to unlearn the decades-old practice of using school self-evaluation as a compliance tool. If successful, school practitioners will be able to trust inspectors that their developmental needs will not be negatively judged. Correspondingly, more inspectors will act with the health of the whole system in mind, become critical friends to schools and resist the punitive approach.

Balancing the power dynamic between OfSTED and schools

In the current system, school leaders and teachers refrain from criticising OfSTED because such behaviours can be seen as obstructing inspection. Furthermore, should a school wish to express dissatisfaction with inspection procedures, inspectors' conduct or inspection results, the complaint procedures are designed to be confusing, time-consuming and financially burdensome. If a complaint against OfSTED cannot be resolved internally with OfSTED, a school can request Independent Complaints Adjudication Service for Ofsted (ICASO) to review the case. However, "ICASO cannot change the outcome of the complaint, but it can make recommendations to OfSTED" (OfSTED, n.d., para. 18). The current complaint system gives disproportionate power to OfSTED over schools. To rebalance this power dynamic, a more transparent and accessible complaint system is essential, especially for addressing serious concerns. An independent third party should provide timely administrative support to schools upon receiving complaints, and their decisions should hold OfSTED accountable rather than merely offering recommendations.

To date, OfSTED has implemented certain preventive measures, such as allowing inspectors to pause inspections should they detect heightened anxiety among school leaders and staff (Walker, 2023d). The next step involves addressing the fundamental cause of this anxiety: fear. As previously highlighted, lesson observations and subject deep-dives are high-inference in nature, demanding inspectors to make expert judgments and interpretations of teachers' work within a short window of time. Inspectors, like theatre critics, make judgments on school performance based on their observations, students' responses and their own professional experience. Judgments in both settings are intrinsically value-laden, time-specific, and subjective (Richards, 2023). The current design of the inspection only allows inspectors to capture a snapshot of the school's performance, not the full picture. This snapshot should serve as a foundation for professional dialogues and reflections, not as a verdict. One major complaint from the teachers' unions is that some inspectors lack frontline experience or relevant knowledge about the subject matter, leading to stressful dialogues with teachers and often unreliable inspection results. One suggestion is to include a designated staff member acting as a school cultural broker and a peer inspector from a similar school type to advise on school-to-school

learning in the inspection team. This addition could complement the observations made by HMIs and OIs, offering a more comprehensive and balanced assessment of school performance.

Ensuring schools' strict compliance with legal requirements, such as safeguarding, is essential and should be overseen by an independent professional body. Immediate responses from school leadership and follow-up checks are needed when serious concerns are raised (Perryman et al., 2023). However, schools' adherence to legal requirements should not be conflated with their needs and capacity for improvement. Especially, they should not be encapsulated by a one-word judgment in an inspection report, potentially impacting a school's reputation over an extended period. According to complexity theory, feedback loops can amplify schools' advantages and disadvantages: "Inadequate" schools are more likely to lose good teachers and parents' support, driving school leaders into a counterproductive panic mode. For schools in dire need of improvement, learning and development thrive on confidence, encouragement and a sense of ownership. To balance the power dynamic, underperforming schools should be given a second chance to internally address the problems highlighted in the inspection and get re-inspected before OfSTED publishes the results to the public.

Paying switching costs while incentivising change adopters

Once a complex system tips into a new regime, it will inevitably experience a phase of chaos until new patterns emerge and self-organise. This trial-and-error process requires substantial switching costs, including money, time, procedural (e.g. drafting, piloting, implementing and reviewing new inspection practices), cognitive (e.g. unlearning old practices and learning new practices), psychological (e.g. managing resistance and distress) and relational (e.g. lobbying key stakeholders, maintaining old networks and finding new allies) costs. Contingency cost should also be generously budgeted to "compensate for the uncertainty inherent in cost and time estimates, as well as unpredictable risk exposure" (Wigmore, 2019, para. 1).

Certain localised practices may emerge during this experimental phase. Regular reviews are vital to track their development and impact, gauging their potential applicability in broader contexts or their confinement to specific locales. Viewing change as a process means we should accept failures as part of learning and afford equal attention to expected and unexpected outcomes in order to recalibrate the course of actions. Boulton et al. (2015, p. 166) remind us that "complexity thinking positions strategy development as more provisional, less definite, less 'once only'". As a new inertial momentum for change emerges and new pathways start to form, early adopters play a pivotal role in sharing successful stories and inviting others to join the process. Their engagement should be incentivised, for example, through free training, public recognition, priority access to resources, and networks.

For a complex inspection system to adapt to future challenges, the key is to establish shared principles and values rather than relying solely on centralised planning. The values upheld by agents shape patterns of interaction, choices and decisions. When agents agree on a shared goal, they may choose different paths to achieve it based on locally built consensus. These local variations make the system versatile and thus resilient to external challenges. All agents in the system should ask themselves what they value most: advancing

their own interests or building a sustainable reciprocal relationship with other agents? If the latter, what steps can they take to foster consensus and reciprocity? Additionally, what tensions and conflicts are necessary to prevent the system from lock-in?

Conclusion

As a complex system, education inspection in England comprises various interdependent agents and policies that co-evolve with the system. Over the past 30-plus years, OfSTED has become the most powerful agent, wielding power over school leaders and teachers. Moreover, it has gained support from the government, impacted parents and students, generated new business opportunities for consultants and polarised public views on education in England. Through the lens of complexity theory, this paper argues that the current inspection practices have made the powerful more powerful at the cost of the powerless, as evidenced by Ruth Perry's suicide following her school's downgrading in an inspection. The imbalanced power dynamics have locked system in and locked alternative solutions out (Boulton et al., 2015). The relationship between OfSTED and the schools has reached "its lowest ebb" due to OfSTED's denial and disregard of the impact of the pandemic and other austerity measures on schools (Price Grimshaw, 2023, p. 40). Meanwhile, Ruth Perry's passing has sparked a new wave of resistance that could potentially tip the inspection system into a new era. Emerging research evidence has challenged OfSTED's authority. In the upcoming years, the general election and the appointment of the new HMCI will inevitably bring new changes and opportunities to the system.

The future cannot be fully predicted; however, agents can proactively survey the evolving landscape, ask powerful questions and use new evidence to adjust the direction of travel. Davis and Sumara (2006) argue that complexity thinking is neither fact-seeking nor interpretation-seeking. Instead, it operates in the realm of pragmatism. Instead of asking "what is?" and "what might be?", we should ask "how should we act?" (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 25). At the core of complexity thinking lies the understanding that to effect meaningful changes, we should take small steps, continuously review progress and learn from both successes and mistakes.

This theoretical paper examines the education inspection system in England through the lens of complexity theory. Moving forward, there is a need for more empirical evidence to monitor the evolution of the inspection system at this critical tipping point. While existing empirical studies have predominantly focused on the experiences of school leaders and teachers during inspections, gathering additional empirical evidence from serving and retired inspectors will provide valuable insights into the ongoing debate.

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