Twenty years inspecting English schools – Ofsted 1992-2012

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1976-1992: Why was inspection reformed?

Proposals for a new national inspection service for schools in England emerged from growing disquiet about state schools from the late 1960s onwards.

In 1976, Prime Minister James Callaghan’s speech at Ruskin College criticising schools had led to a national debate. Education was given increasing priority by the Thatcher government in its later years, culminating in the introduction of a national curriculum in 1988 but it was only after the replacement of Margaret Thatcher by John Major in 1990 that the government decided to reform school inspection (Wilcox and Gray [1] also Dunford).

Previously, school inspections nationally had been carried out by Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI) whilst most local education authorities (LEAs) had teams which both inspected and advised schools in their area. HMI had advised ministers on the state of publicly funded schools since 1839.

They undertook regular full inspections, with teams of up to 15, as well as short inspections on particular aspects of schools. After 1983, inspection reports were published.

But although widely respected in schools they were increasingly seen by Conservative ministers as part of the problem with education, with Kenneth Baker claiming they had encouraged a 1960s liberal, egalitarian consensus (Lee and Fitz). Furthermore, some ministers thought the annual report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector, Chris Woodhead, fuelled a continuing debate over standards.

Key points

- Ofsted was set up following a period of sustained criticism of English state education. Government policy after 1992 was to ensure all schools were inspected regularly by a rigorous and transparent process. Reports were to be written to a common format accessible to parents and judgements on schools consistent.

- By the late 1990s all English schools had been inspected in a process which was now a major part of English school life whilst the high profile and controversial views of the chief inspector, Chris Woodhead, fuelled a continuing debate over standards.

- After Woodhead’s departure, Ofsted adopted a more collaborative approach to schools and encouraged them to evaluate their own performance. Ofsted’s responsibilities had increased but its role in the failure to protect a murdered London baby led to renewed demands for more effective inspection.

- The coalition government elected in 2010 is simplifying and toughening inspection. Arguments continue over Ofsted’s accuracy and fairness, particularly towards schools in deprived areas, and its effectiveness in improving schools.

- Debate also continues over: (i) how wide the inspection remit should be; (ii) where responsibility for improvement after inspection should lie; and (iii) whether three companies should have a monopoly of provision.

1992-1993: Ofsted is established

The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) was created by the Education (Schools) Act 1992 shortly before the election won by John Major. The new organisation was to be led by Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools (HMCI) but there would be fewer HMIs and these were left, at least initially, with a largely monitoring role. Teams of inspectors, led by a registered inspector, from both the private sector and LEAs, would bid to win contracts to inspect schools.

They had to include a lay inspector with no prior involvement in education (a stipulation later dropped). Reports were to be published faster than in the past, within 25 days, and governors were then given 40 days to produce an action plan to address key issues.

The bill passed relatively unscathed, although a clause that would have given schools responsibility for choosing their own inspection team was amended in the Lords to ensure that Ofsted would decide on both inspection timings and teams for each school. Another proposal to stop LEAs inspecting their own schools was also defeated (Dunford).

The new organisation and its first head, Professor Stewart Sutherland, faced a formidable task. Between March and September 1992 they had to produce an inspection framework and handbook, recruit thousands of inspectors and train them before the first inspections in 1993.

Schools would be graded on a seven point scale from ‘excellent’ (1) to ‘very poor’ (7). The handbook included evaluation criteria with descriptions of what ‘good’ (3) and ‘satisfactory’ (4) would mean in all aspects of school life to be judged. Ministers had previously criticised HMI reports for lack of clarity and all reports were now to follow a single framework with the same main headings:

- Basic information about the school and its pupils.
- The inspection’s main findings and key issues for action.
- Standards of achievement (progress) and quality of learning.
- Efficiency of the school.
- Pupils’ personal development, behaviour and attendance.
- Subjects of the curriculum.
- The factors contributing to the findings.
including teaching quality, assessment, curriculum quality, special educational needs, equality of opportunity, management and resources, pupil welfare and parental links.

Today’s reports are shorter and individual subject reports have been largely dropped. Never inspections were the main elements of those lost reports from 1993. They were prominent in those of 2012 although, over time, comments on resources and accommodation have reduced significantly. By 1994, when Stewart Sutherland retired as HMIC, much had been accomplished. The first inspections had taken place in September 1993 and by May 1994 over 7,500 inspectors had been trained; most were local authority advisers with some retired HMI, heads or teachers and a few serving heads. Within three years Ofsted was inspecting 6,000 schools annually and had inspected every state school in the country.


Stewart Sutherland was replaced by Chris Woodhead, who, over the next few years, was to become one of the most influential and controversial figures in English education. To his supporters he was a fearless upholder of traditional standards and critic of bad teaching. He was dismissive of most educational research and sceptical of the way deprivation had been made an excuse for low standards in many inner city schools. However, his opponents claimed he was unfairly negative about state schools and used performance and inspection data in a selective, sometimes misleading, manner.

Shortly after his appointment he claimed that inspectors had found that 15,000 teachers in England were incompetent and should be removed. Arguably, the figure itself was not particularly contentious: it represented, after all, barely 3% of the teaching force. But furious union leaders and others pointed out that Ofsted lacked the data to uphold the claim. In 1999, Robin Alexander, who had worked with Chris Woodhead on the influential report Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools (1992), wrote, ‘what HMCI presents as fact may well be at variance with the evidence’, citing Chris Woodhead’s insistence that primary schools would have to become more literate and numeracy targets ‘unless the non-core elements of the curriculum were drastically slimmed down’.

But Alexander quoted an Ofsted survey reporting that ‘schools which did well in the tests at KS2 in English and maths were the ones which provided a broad curriculum’ (Alexander).

There was also concern about significant alterations to inspection reports that changed the original meaning. A report into reading in 45 inner London primary schools was presented as highly critical of the standards achieved. But, according to Colin Richards, then a senior authority inspector, ‘nothing much happened’. To his inspective report ‘Commentators are too often wont to de


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past years, it is only right that we have higher expectations.’

2005-10: A wider remit
The mid-decade also saw a significant enlargement of Ofsted’s remit. It had already taken on responsibility for the inspection of childminding in 2001 but in 2005 its responsibilities and powers grew further as four separate organisations were merged into Ofsted: the Commission for Social Care Inspection, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Crown Court Education, and the inspection side of the Adult Learning Inspectorate. The education secretary, Ruth Kelly, claimed that Ofsted would now be able to follow learning from early years right through to adult and work-based settings, ‘while at the same time sustaining focused, high-quality inspections of standards in our schools and across wider services for children’. (The Guardian 13/12/05).

Two years later Ofsted assumed responsibility for the oversight of child protection in England. This was to lead to the darkest hour in the organisation’s history. After a young child, Peter Connolly, was killed by his mother’s partner in Haringey in August 2007, Ofsted was severely criticised by MPs and the media for failing to report serious shortcomings in Haringey’s childcare and protection provision.

In December 2008, HMCI Christine Gilbert admitted to failings in Ofsted’s oversight of Haringey council; she acknowledged that inspectors were misled by positive data provided by education officers and consequently gave the authority a ‘good’ rating for child protection only weeks after the toddler’s death. Gilbert said: ‘I think that if the grades that we gave in [2007] gave a false assurance we have to take some responsibility for that. I’m absolutely not washing my hands of it.’ (The Guardian 06/12/08).

But others, like Graham Stuart MP, the Chair of the House of Commons Education Committee, went further, questioning whether Ofsted’s resources were spread too thinly and asking whether it possessed the right skills mix to inspect services provided for children virtually from their birth to their late teens. (Times Education 10/09/08).

The Baby P scandal also dealt a blow to any view that inspection could be largely data driven. Although organisations such as the Fischer Family Trust were producing sophisticated pupil performance and progress measures, which enabled comparisons to be made with similar inspections in England and across wider services for children. (The Guardian 13/12/05).

In 2009, another new inspection framework was launched, allowing parents to express views on their child’s school at any time. Parent View, a new online questionnaire, was published. The number of key areas inspectors had to report on was reduced to four: pupils’ achievement, teaching quality, the behaviour and safety of pupils, and leadership and management. The change was welcomed by many, who felt inspection had grown unwieldy with too many aspects of school life included.

Further changes in September 2012 meant a school could no longer be classified as outstanding if teaching was not outstanding whilst the term ‘satisfactory’ was to be replaced with ‘requires improvement’. An earlier suggestion to make all inspections ‘no notice’ was dropped as impractical (what happened if the inspectors arrived on sports day?) and schools would be informed the day before the inspection. Parent View, a new online questionnaire, was launched, allowing parents to express views on their child’s school at any time.

Shortly after his appointment, Sir Michael made clear his intentions: ‘I believe we need radical improvements to the education system in this country . . . We’ve got to up our game . . .’ My view is that no judgment is too far too long – it has settled into the system.’

But amongst some longer-serving heads and teachers his remarks created a sense of déjà vu. A headteachers’ association officer, Malcolm Trobe, said that Sir Michael’s comments were ‘damaging and demoralising dedicated professionals’ (bbc.co.uk/news/education 09/02/12).

So, 20 years after Ofsted was established, opinion is still sharply divided over its value to the English education system. There are clearly two issues which are key to judging the organisation: how accurate it is and how effective it is in achieving its aims.

How accurate is Ofsted?
Since September 1993 Ofsted has overseen millions of inspections of English schools, involving observations of hundreds of thousands of lessons and other activities, and published a vast array of reports on schools and aspects of education. The credibility of Ofsted must surely rest on the accuracy of the judgements in those reports.

In the early years Ofsted the emphasis placed on ensuring accuracy and consistency impressed many. In the 150 years since school inspections in England had started nothing like the Ofsted inspection handbook and framework, making explicit what inspectors were looking for, had existed. Local authority inspectors interviewed in 1995 were unanimous in their approval of both, ‘. . . an excellent tool. A real treasure’, said one. The inspectors commented Ofsted for its ‘thoroughness . . . and comprehensiveness’ (Wilcox and Gray [2]).

Nevertheless, surveys towards the end of the first round of inspections in the late ’90s found as many as 35% of heads thought the overall judgements on their schools were inaccurate. Although this might be dismissed as predictable complaining by those disappointed with inspectors’ findings, a third of this group actually thought their report had been too positive (Ouston, Fidler and Earley), whilst other research has suggested that, ‘a good [Ofsted] report for an ineffectual teacher had undermined heads’ efforts to deal with the case’ (CEPPP).

Professor Dylan Wiliam, of the Institute of Education, recently challenged Ofsted to evaluate the reliability of its school inspections and publish the findings, asking: ‘If two inspectors inspect the same school, a week apart, with no communication between them, would they come to the same ratings?’ (TES 03/02/12).

Further doubts were raised by accusations that inspectors had ‘cut and pasted’ parts of old reports into new ones (bbc.co.uk/news/education 08/06/12) and that one Ofsted contractor had appointed lead inspectors who were not qualified teachers (bbc.co.uk/news/education 28/08/12). Jan Webber, who led an inspection of Ofsted, found the difficulty schools have in challenging Ofsted. She wrote of one report ‘riddled with inconsistencies and inaccuracies as well as an unfair assessment of the school’. Senior staff spent weeks gathering evidence to contest the report.

The school received strong support from the local authority, the school improvement partner and governors and eventually Ofsted upheld the complaint and upgraded the school. Webber concluded that ‘disputing an Ofsted report . . . is not easily done’ (Webber).

In the early years Ofsted, there have been reports about Ofsted’s judgements on schools with the poorest and most challenging intakes. The weight to be given to the socio-economic circumstances of pupils had concerned HMI for years. In 1966 HMI devised a separate category for ‘schools in very poorer areas . . . which could not . . . match’ the achievements of the higher categories but . . . did splendid social work’ (Gray).

After Ofsted was established, those in charge felt such an approach might embed low expectations in some schools and let down
the most needy. Yet, after the new inspections started, it quickly became clear that schools with more favoured intakes were far more likely to receive good judgements than those serving poor areas.

The difference was stark, as shown by a 1995 study which reported that 90% of schools in the two highest social contexts were judged well or very well by Ofsted, compared with only 10% in the two lowest social contexts (Matthews and Smith).

Although Ofsted has increasingly used contextual information – such as the number of children on free school meals – to compare the performance of schools with those with similar intakes, the debate continues. The head of a British school, where exam results had improved considerably but which only received a ‘satisfactory’ rating, told the BBC in 2012 that, whilst she agreed that every school should aspire to be at least good, it was very difficult for those in challenging circumstances.

In response, HMI noted that 700 such schools were rated outstanding by Ofsted (bbc.co.uk/education 09/02/12). In June 2012, Michael Wilshaw tried to move the debate on by announcing a review (bbc.co.uk/news/education 09/02/12).

Some 20 years after its foundation, Ofsted’s role in the English education system remains both significant and highly controversial. It is difficult to determine Ofsted’s role in securing school improvement as there is so little agreement as to whether schools have improved at all in the past 20 years and, if they have, by how much.

Debates about standards continue despite Ofsted’s own evidence pointing to schools having improved (Ofsted [2]). Nor have changes to theOfsted process – ‘the fiddling at the margins’, as one senior ex-HMI described it – clarified its contribution to school improvement. In the 20 years since Ofsted’s foundation there have been 10 new inspection frameworks. The impact of other educational reforms and wider social factors must also be considered.

Kenneth Clarke had said that informing parents better about schools would be a key aim of Ofsted and an early survey found most parents thought inspection reports helpful and informative. Ofsted’s own evidence pointing to schools having improved (Ofsted [2]).

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References