

OFSTED, SCHMOFSTED

Carol Taylor FITZ-GIBBON

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Is OFSTED value for money? I strongly doubt it, a point which will be developed in this chapter. I write, it must be said, with a concern bordering on anger when I hear schools describe the stress induced by OFSTED visits. First, however, a minor amusement which nevertheless makes a serious point about methodology.

My only experience of inspection was as a teenager in school wondering why we were having yesterday's maths lesson over again. An inspector who recently heard me recount this in a meeting, and who did not join in the general laughter, said gruffly 'We would have asked pupils. We'd have found that out'. That set me wondering how I would have felt as a teenager if I had been quizzed by the inspector. Had I told him it was yesterday's maths lesson wouldn't I have then been very worried about the possibility of having caused harm to my teacher? Had I not told him, would I have been ridden with guilt for not having told 'the whole truth'? It's an unfortunate methodology with this possibility for its impact on students. But it is also an inadequate methodology since a fair proportion of the class probably would not have noticed it was yesterday's maths lesson. Not only would the inquisition of pupils have been distressing, the chance of an accurate finding was probably low.

Inadequate methodology

The OFSTED brief concentrates on student achievements yet adopts a methodology which is inappropriate. If you want to assess student achievement you have to test every pupil, or an accurately drawn, representative sample, and evaluate those tests against earlier tests taken by the same pupils, in order to look at the progress made, nowadays called the 'value-added'. Short of this, people are simply inventing guesses as to whether or not a school is 'effective'. Short of such evidence no school should be called a 'failing school'. Nor are a few observations of a rather small sample of the year's lessons an adequate basis for judgement. The link between process and outcome is tenuous indeed in a complex system like education and many ways of teaching may produce good outcomes. Claims to all-seeing expertise and the ability to make absolute judgements of 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory' should be doubted in the absence of evidence. Are the findings such that they would be called 'secure' in a court?

These are serious matters, for at stake is the morale of teachers not to mention the confidence of parents and the comfort of pupils. Pupils get an entirely exaggerated view of inspectors and have been known to ask 'Do you know the Queen?' and 'Are you going to close down our school?' Do parents really want their children to be subjected to this kind of disruptive inquisition, the extreme disturbance that an inspection involves? Surely there are better approaches to maintaining quality for every pupil and probably cheaper ones. Apparently an inspection might cost about £30,000 per school and, as one head teacher said, 'it costs us another £30,000 just to get ready for the inspection'. All this preparation for inspection, does it produce worthwhile change? There is a well known tendency to believe in the value of anything on which you have expended great effort so the self-report of schools may not be accurate here. Again, evidence is needed for the effectiveness of such expensive procedures.

Of course, one holds no rancour against individual inspectors, many of whom say that they are trying to humanise what is clearly an unsatisfactory system. Their problem is often that there are no other jobs available, with the shrinking of LEAs and the dismemberment of the traditional HMI.

Amazing legislation

Much of the unfortunate ethos of the OFSTED approach stems from the legislation. The *Monty Python* team could have a field day with a reconstruction of the drafting of this uniquely unpleasant legislation:

'We'll search out failing schools.'

'What about exemplary schools?'

'Oh no. Not as much fun. Put in the boot!'

'Won't we have to write a lot?'

'Oh no, be done in a week and Bingo off to the Press three weeks later.'

'Couldn't we be criticised for rank amateurism pulling all our data together so quickly? I once did an M.Ed. and it took ages

'Short is efficient costs less!'

'What if schools have data on their own?'

'Great we'll use that! Job done. Even more efficient.'

'What if they won't show us that data? They might produce it after the inspection and we just might, mightn't we, just possibly I mean, have got some things wrong?'

'Hmm

General gloom; spirits sink visibly. Paranoid clouds drift over the group till one brightens up:

'We'll make them give us the data!'

'Great! How?'

'Slap them with a fine!'

'Great stuff make it a level 2 fine!'

'Ahhhh. *(like the Bisto Kid)* 'A level 2 fine!' *(A level 2 fine is written into the act of parliament, no kidding.)*

General smirking, except one who is imagining a situation:

'What if they say: "There it is. There's the data. It's on the computer." '

'We might not be able to get it off.'

Gloom again.

'People seem to keep data on computers now.' *(said miserably)*

'Yes' *(sigh)* 'That's why they got so annoyed with the W grade in the SATs' *(Scouts' Honour Assessment Tasks)*

'Don't mention the SATs!'

One would-be reggie then takes a deep breath and says 'Alright. We'll take care of that too: Put it into the legislation: "if the data is held on the computer then the school must assist the inspectors in getting it off the computer." '

(It's written into the act of parliament, no kidding! What an international embarrassment.)

Should schools which have good data hide it and run the risk of a level 2 fine or should they show the inspectors their data? Some heads might feel it's safest to be nothing but nice

to inspectors indeed this might be why so many inspectors believe themselves to be so wise no one has disabused them of their presumption. The longer they do the job the more they are subject to false feedback and the more in error they become about their own abilities.

Surely the scientific, rational response to an inspection is to run a validity check on the methodology. Let the inspectors produce their reports and then let the school check the conclusions against the school's value-added data. Then we can gradually learn

- (a) the accuracy of the inspectors and
- (b) the costs and benefits of the inspection. Did inspectors do more than pick up gossip and tell you what you knew already?

Did the massive paper exercise in preparation lead to improvements? Were all inspectors equally accurate? What was useful and what was not? Was it value for money? Such information could help us all to learn. I shall be pleased to receive reports, collate and summarise them.

'Failing schools' is not a concept derived from the data

When high quality, value-added data is available it does not point towards the existence of 'failing schools'. The data shows considerable variability within schools. Schools are not all good or all bad; they are generally a mixture. We will not achieve quality in education by trying to pretend that the data is other than it is. We will not achieve quality in education by moving children from one building to another or from one type of school structure to another. The type of school has little impact on the value-added as was made clear in the report of the Audit Commission *Unfinished Business*. To maintain quality every school must watch its performance in every area and it cannot do so without comparative data as to how well similar students are achieving in other schools. This comparative, value-added data for each classroom is not something that can be published in newspapers, however, for it is personnel work. No profession does its personnel work in public.

Fear does not promote quality

Indeed all the promotion of fear and anxiety in schools flies in the face of the ideas of W. Edwards Deming (1986) who is credited with having promoted quality throughout Japanese Industry. His system of total quality management is based on good statistical data and informed interpretation thereof. He advises 'drive out fear' and observes that 'whenever there is fear we get the wrong figures'. A current example is the publication of truancy rates. As a head said recently 'There won't be any more truancy; it's all excused absences from now on.' The system which introduces fear, as in the publication of everything, including truancy rates, is a system which corrupts. Eastern Europe was full of development plans and targets all currently being urged on schools. Eastern Europe collapsed in a morass of disinformation. Not only are such systems ineffective they do harm. The publication of truancy rates will lead to a distortion of data and will actually deter people from getting accurate information about their schools.

'To live effectively is to live with good information' (Norbert Weiner, 1971). I suspect that the OFSTED inspections, and the Act which prompted their design, are a source of poor information in the system; an inquisition which is more likely to cause stress and strain, and a drop in effectiveness, than to lead to improvement.

Grasping at straws

Presented with the impossible task of wandering around the school and making judgements about effectiveness, inspectors have traditionally grasped at straws. One of the straws is teacher expectations. Regularly we are told that expectations are too low. How they measure these expectations and how they check that the low expectations are causing low achievement is something of a mystery. The research in this area is exceedingly mixed. There is about as much evidence for low expectations producing good results as for high expectations producing good results.

One possible summary of the data is likely to be that accurate expectations produce the best results. If teachers' expectations are too high or too low they are out of line with reality and prevent the teacher from accurately matching tasks to the capabilities of the students. However, even that generalisation may not apply to individual cases. There is no way around the need to monitor closely.

More recently another straw has been grasped, one floating across the Atlantic as so often happens. In the United States some years ago a researcher correlated achievement levels with the length of the school day and the length of the school year and declared that schools which were teaching longer hours for more days had higher achievements than other schools. Within a month or two the data were questioned since he had failed to observe that the short days were in the inner cities and the long days were in the suburbs. The short days reflected the extreme stress that the American inner city schools endured. Undeterred by the counter-evidence, and using the invalid procedure of drawing causal conclusions from survey research, the researcher declared that if school days and school years were lengthened then achievement would rise dramatically. This idea appealed to administrators as a cheap solution to school effectiveness; almost as cheap as telling teachers to raise their expectations. In many States, legislation was passed to lengthen the school year and lengthen the school day without, of course, paying teachers any more. Millions of teachers working in stressed schools lost personal time, recovery time. The predicted gains in achievement did not follow.

More of the same does not produce better outcomes. In fact time is a very difficult variable with which to work. Given a forty-five minute lesson a teacher may recover the ground that might otherwise be covered in a fifty-minute lesson. Pacing and delivery are highly complex; concentration spans and many other factors come into the picture.

We are always dealing, in schooling, with highly complex situations. Good teaching may take many different forms. Very different methods may produce equally good results. It is not a trivial matter to judge the effectiveness of what is happening in a classroom. The only solution is to monitor and feed back the information to the units responsible, such as the school department in secondary schools or the individual teacher in primary schools. Measures of value-added department by department show great variations, not only amongst departments in one year in one school but from year to year for the same department. (To tie performance-related pay to such indicators would be about the same as tying it to the weather.) This phenomenon of inherent variability is well recognised in the literature on total quality management. In a complex system with many factors impinging on results there will be random variation. To attribute all this variation to the impact of particular teachers is rarely correct.

As schools become familiar with this kind of monitoring they learn to recognise when there is need for concern and they are able to take actions and watch the results of those actions as the indicators change from year to year. It may be that such performance monitoring is what will improve schools and colleges.

Signs of hope

The Further Education Funding Council, OFSTED's parallel organisation dealing with the post-16, college sector, has produced an excellent approach to inspection. After wide consultation they have recognised that there is no point in aggregating data across all the courses in a college.

Each course will be inspected independently of other courses. The inspection will be open and collaborative, with a member of the college being with the inspectors at all times. There will be an on-going relationship with a staff inspector for the college, not the hit-and-run of OFSTED. The inspections will be evaluated both by the inspectors and by the college and the system will develop; it is not rigid or finished. This is an intelligent approach to a complex job. It is likely to improve quality rather than to cause problems. In place of reliance on improbably perceptive perceptions – inspectors' opinions about data – it recommends that colleges collect quantitative indicators.

There is a democracy about quantification, an openness and fairness that cannot otherwise be obtained. It seems to have been Kenneth Baker who first started using the term 'fair performance indicator' a very good idea. Fair performance indicators in the form of value-added measures seem to be exactly the way to go towards quality, totally consistent with the concepts of quality management.

Endnote

Of course, it must be admitted that the creation of effective systems is to some extent guess work and is a difficult task. I have written in fairly uncompromising tones because of a sense of anger at injustices being piled upon hard-working teachers. What I would really urge is that we begin to ask politicians to behave intelligently rather than to claim that they know the answers by some magical application of ideology or intuition. The intelligent way to approach the question of how to improve the quality of schools is to run clinical trials: to submit some schools to OFSTED-type inspection (unless this were to be ruled out as unethical treatment of human subjects), to put others under the aegis of something more akin to FEFC and to give others simply monitoring with feedback systems, providing fair performance indicators. Run these three approaches in equivalent groups of schools and we might be able to evaluate the impact five years later. The National Audit Office could conduct an independent cost-benefit analysis and tell us whether or not OFSTED provides value for money.

References

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