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The network round the school: Additional, Team and Lead Ofsted Inspectors and the work they do in and with schools in the 'self-improving schools system' *(Revised December 2015)*

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This paper reports work in progress; citation by request only please. Feedback and comments are most welcome. Aspects of the paper are intended for publication.

ORIGINAL ABSTRACT (Published January 2015)

The paper reports the findings of a short series of interviews with Additional Inspectors. This arose out of a much wider project researching the developing schools 'system' or 'landscape' (Simkins *et al*, 2014) after nearly five years of the Coalition Government, due for publication late 2015 (forthcoming). Interviews in maintained schools and academies and local authorities had revealed a wide range of views of the background and competence of Ofsted Inspection Teams (echoed in, for example, the Times Educational Supplement, 2014). Further discussions with one of the current Ofsted Inspection Providers (until school inspections were taken 'in house' with effect from September 1st, 2015), and examination of the web-based lists of additional inspectors of the two others, revealed first some disagreement with this view but second the wide range of backgrounds from which current inspectors are drawn.

The inspection provider agreed to carry a short text 'advertising' the wider research and requesting contact from inspectors willing to contribute to it. Thirty offers were received almost by return. Twenty semi-structured interviews were then held, of between 40 and 90 minutes each, largely by telephone, but with some face-to-face where travel was relatively easy for the author. The interviews were structured round the extent of the interviewees' involvement in inspection and what it helped them bring to their other and wider work where they did any. This latter was then related to the themes of the wider project, including the networks of support and advice that secondary, and to a lesser extent, primary schools have been developing with the changing, and in many cases, declining direct involvement of local authorities in schools. Finally, these findings were discussed with a District HMI, a key role in the new 'polity'.

Within this opportunity sample, inspectors came from a wide range of backgrounds, including serving and ex-primary, secondary and special headteachers, serving and ex-LA officers and a variety of private sector roles. They were all involved in development and support work with schools, mostly in all phases, and even where serving LA officers, on an individual basis. The

wider research had found diminishing, but varied, loyalty to LA provision (in some places integrated with that of Teaching School Alliances and Universities), especially at secondary level. But what was most striking here was the word-of-mouth recommendations on which these interviewees (and heads previously interviewed) reported working.

The wider implications, if these results are replicated, is the absence of singular, developed school partnership arrangements in many places, a key objective of a 'self-improving school system' (Hargreaves, 2012b). And the informal support networks that schools have been developing will degrade or disappear over the next few years, because of the age of many of those working on a day by day contracted rate. This leaves a significant systemic development problem for a self-improving system, for which no one has prime responsibility.

Introduction

This paper is based on evidence from a short series of interviews with additional, team, lead and other Ofsted inspectors undertaken during the academic year 2014/5. These form part of a much wider series of live interview data that form the basis for a consideration of the contribution of a self-improving school system to achieving greater equity (Riddell, 2016). A first paper from this research was presented at least year's BERA, available from my academia site (Riddell, 2014).

One of refrains from headteachers, heads of academy chains and LA officers I interviewed during the 2013/4 academic year concerned the background and perceived inconsistency of Ofsted Inspection Teams (also echoed in the Times Educational Supplement – see for example, Stewart, 2014). The headteacher of an outstanding maintained secondary faith school, for example, described the 'volatility' of the 'current Ofsted regime' as a major negative feature of the current professional landscape. The head of an academy chain with six secondary schools described how he saw some Ofsted inspectors as having a 'very formulaic view' about teaching and leadership. He went on to say that four of the chain's schools were inspected in one week the previous year, and he had seen 'at first hand the variation in quality across four teams'.

Finally, an officer of a local authority in an urban area described his authority's experiences of inconsistency. Ofsted teams from one of the Inspection Service Providers (ISPs) – see below - comprising inspectors with 100% secondary backgrounds had inspected primary schools and were so surprised at what the children could do that schools were considered much better than they actually were. Teams coming in to a school for a follow-up inspection after a school had been judged as 'requires improvement' (RI) previously, considered the school was still RI even though they had been told by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) that they were now 'good'. The issue for all these interviewees was variability rather than uniformly poor quality.

As a consequence, I held further discussions with one of then Ofsted ISPs. This revealed first some disagreement with these reported views, but second the wide range of backgrounds from which current additional inspectors, as

they were then known, were drawn. This was confirmed by an examination of the web-based lists of additional inspectors of the two other private sector providers. The ISP agreed to carry a short text advertising my wider research requesting contact from inspectors willing to contribute to it. Thirty offers were received almost by return.

Background to Ofsted terms and school inspections

This is not the place to give a detailed history of Ofsted but for those working outside England, the following may help.

Following the clutch of reforms put into place on England by the 1988 and 1992 Education Acts, the Office for Standards in Education was set up and a regular inspection cycle, at first every six years, commenced for secondary schools in 1993, and for primary and special schools the following year. These reports have always been available to the public and schools are obliged to provide parents with copies.

Ofsted inspections result in one summary overall grade for a school. These are currently: 1 for outstanding, 2 for good, 3 for requires improvement, and 4 for inadequate. Inadequate is further divided into 'serious weaknesses', broadly where it is thought that the school itself has the capacity to improve with appropriate support, and 'requires special measures', broadly where it is thought that this is not the case (Ofsted, 2015a). The significance of the overall grade is that it can trigger an intervention. This may be through an enforced change of formal status, for example, to being an academy if the school is maintained. Alternatively, the leadership team may be replaced, or a wider change in the school's governance arrangements, including the replacement of the existing governing body by an Interim Executive Board. These interventions are not discussed in this paper. There is more about them in Riddell (2016).

Inspections in the most recent period, until August 31st 2015, have been undertaken by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) and Additional Inspectors (AIs). HMIs are employed directly by Ofsted and are recruited from the senior reaches of schools and the wider education service. Additional Inspectors are of two sorts. First, there are those employed directly by Ofsted, often seconded from schools for a fixed period and sometimes referred to as Associate Inspectors. Second, and by far the largest group, are those employed by one of the three Inspection Service Providers (ISPs).

Teams contracted from the private sector have always undertaken routine school inspections, that is, not those following a recent overall grade of 3 or 4. Originally, these were from small companies, often formed by ex-members of local authority staff, but since 2009, Ofsted has contracted with three companies for its inspections. These are Tribal Group for the South of England, including London, SERCO for the midlands, and CfBT (a not for profit) for the North. These contractors have then appointed and employed AIs often on a day by day basis to manage and lead school inspections. The inspector leading the inspection – the lead inspector (LI) - has additional

responsibilities, including producing the report, and may be an AI or HMI. The ISP also provided training and updates on behalf of Ofsted.

During the period of the interviews, Ofsted was undertaking major changes in these arrangements in order to bring them 'in house' as they referred to it, or no longer privatised. All existing AIs were invited to apply to be accredited under the new arrangements and, according to Ofsted itself, nearly 3,000 of them did so, but less than 2,000 were appointed. This process involved a series of tests, including online, and weekend training, although this element amounted to less than twenty minutes according to one interviewee. According to the TES and interview evidence from the wider project, many inspectors intending to continue were failed because of their 'writing skills', including serving headteachers. From September 2015, HMIs will line manage between 10 and 20 of these newly accredited inspectors, now to be termed Ofsted Inspectors (OIs) with whom they will contract directly for inspecting schools. Inspections of Early Years settings remain with the current three contractors for the time being.

At the same time, Ofsted were revising their overall framework for inspecting schools and have developed a new 'Common Inspection Framework' for all providers. The overall changes were outlined in a document sent to all schools entitled 'The Future of Inspection' (Ofsted, 2015c) and a letter sent to headteachers at the end of the summer term by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw. The new framework was published the same week as this paper was being finalised.

The strategic place and function of Ofsted

Although the original stimulus for these interviews had been the reliability of the process of inspection itself, they are also significant for the role of Ofsted in the wider polity, or the governance arrangements for schools.

In general terms in England, there has been a shift from the notions of 'policy levers' (Barber, 2008, 2015), endemic under the Labour Governments from 1997 until 2010, whereby Government sought direct links between the actions and pronouncements of ministers and their officials on the one hand, and the ways that teachers worked with children on the other. In the 'delivery chains' that ensued (Barber, 2008), school leaders were positioned as the implementers of national reform (Gunter, 2012) and local authorities (LAs) as conduits for central government (Ozga, 2009).

The author has written elsewhere (Riddell, 2013) to the effect that the early advertised approaches of the Coalition Government (2010-15), at least as signaled in highly significant politician's speeches (Cameron, 2010), were to move away from such 'top down' models of policy making. In that context, Ofsted school inspection reports provided part of what was as seen as the rich array of public data by which parents were to hold schools continually to account in the market, not just at the time of school transfer. Ofsted thus formed part of the changing state arrangements that, with the increasingly complex variety of published data, contributed to the 'constant surveillance' described by Ozga.

At the same time, an Ofsted judgment has in itself triggered external interventions since the 1990s, sometimes from the local authority - though these will now cease - and sometimes directly from the Secretary of State. The policy formations governing such interventions have evolved considerably since notions of 'fresh start' - in form at least - (Riddell, 2009; 2016) but have always been accompanied by the particular, changing discourse of derision around 'failing schools'. Ofsted by itself (Ofsted, 2012) raised the stakes for schools during the Coalition Government, by replacing the former grade of 'satisfactory' by 'requires improvement', thus adding a further 'category' that could generate an intervention. It is not clear how much discussion there had been between Ofsted and the DfE before this change in the light of the subsequent 'spat between the two Michaels' (BBC, 2014) about inspection. The possible change had been advertised under the previous Government by the then Chief Inspector, Christine Gilbert.

But the Coalition Government itself had also raised the stakes by raising the so-called floor (ie minimum outcome) targets. These were originally set for secondary schools in 2001 at 15% of students achieving 5 A*-Cs at GCSE, but rose to 50% for 2015 on the newer 5ACEM measure (including English and Maths), as announced in the only white paper of that government (DfE, 2010).

And in one of the first acts of the new Conservative Government in 2015, this target was again raised - to 60% - with corresponding changes to those for primary schools at the end of Key Stage 2 related to three years of reasonable progress. The new Government also advertised a regime with the intention of much more aggressive school intervention – first signaled in another significant speech by the Prime Minister (Cameron, 2015). New legislation in the first year of this Government is intended to allow intervention in maintained schools (ie those that are not academies) by the relatively new Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs), part of the developing regional state for Education and, it is argued and expected, replacing the role of the local authority in at least this regard.

Ofsted itself is now organised regionally, though not to exactly the same boundaries of the regional school commissioners everywhere. In at least one region, and probably more, the two regional officials meet and communicate regularly especially where there are problems in academies. This may partly resolve the problem with the lack of capacity in the Education Funding Agency (NAO, 2014), but with the new legislation, Ofsted and the new RSCs form part of a regional regulatory framework for *all* schools - with a developing regional infrastructure of 'system leadership' - that governs intervention and challenge for all schools. The forcible conversion to academy status, it is argued here, should be seen as the basis for setting this regulatory framework and nothing more. As a very experienced Ofsted inspector said, it was not the nature of governance itself that made for outstanding schools, but in his view, the sorts of leadership it made possible and, therefore, how the quality of teaching and learning was impacted. This varied!

Professional formation and positioning

For the headteacher and classroom teacher, Ofsted inspection has been a crucial positioning and professionally forming experience for over twenty years. This is partly because of the high stakes involved for the school and the fact that the terms of inspection may also be used to help shape career development and teacher professional identity (Baxter, 2013), especially when - as is intended (Ofsted, 2015c) – inspectors are expected to be largely serving practitioners. According to Ofsted (*ibidem*), this will be true for 70% of inspectors from September 2015. So the Ofsted framework, and the nature of school inspection constitute (possibly) 'a new regime of truth' (Hall and Noyes, 2009: 852) and (certainly) a disciplinary regime, as Hall and Noyes say, in a Foucauldian or indeed any other sense. One of the primary headteacher inspectors interviewed, after two outstanding verdicts, considered that his school was 'in a fortunate position to be masters of (their) own destinies', but that nothing lasts for ever.

'What does Ofsted want?' has always been important, without doubt, and affects what teachers do as Waldegrave and Simons (2014: 5) lament in a Policy Exchange publication. They advocate the abolition of the Ofsted grade for teaching and all routine lesson observations, among other things. They argue that the question should wither away as schools 'increasingly decide what they want' (*ibid*).

But perceptions of what it is that Ofsted might want have varied, possibly over time. With earlier Ofsted publications on, for example, the early stages of the literacy and numeracy strategies, set within a moral panic about economic success and whole class teaching (see Reynolds and Farrell, 1996); the public attitudes towards teachers expressed by the first HMCI; and the advent of the three and four part lesson as part of the national strategies, many schools tried hard to present more formal lessons to inspectors.

That was not always how Ofsted has been painted, however. Within the context of arguing that teacher bloggers helped education reform under the Coalition Government, Old (2015: 58) quotes a speech made by Michael Gove, the former Secretary of Stare for Education in England, to the Policy Exchange in 2013:

> As a result, and as teacher bloggers like Andrew Old have chronicled, time and again too much emphasis was given to particular practices like group work and discovery learning: while Ofsted inspectors marked teachers down for such heinous crimes as 'talking too much', 'telling pupils things' or 'dominating the discussion'.

In other words, Ofsted came to classrooms with a 'progressive', child-centred view of what teaching should be about. Waldegrave and Simons (*ibidem*) put this down to the time of Christine Gilbert as Chief Inspector (2006-2011). Peal (2014), after analysing 130 secondary inspection reports in 2013, maintains that there was a 'preferred Ofsted style of teaching' (p9). This included a preference for independent learning, pupils taking responsibility for their own learning, group work, an aversion to pupils being passive and teachers talking

or directing the lessons too much. These are all arguably at odds with the preferred pedagogies of the former national strategies.

The views of Old, Waldegrave and Simons have a wider political context in terms of the inspections (they oppose) of new free schools, but nevertheless Ofsted (2014) issued one of its 'clarifications' for schools later in the year saying that, again among other things, lessons would not be graded and nor would they expect school leadership teams to do so. Ofsted does not 'require' (p1) schools to produce individual lesson plans; it does not expect to see any specific frequency, type or volume of marking or feedback. It does expect marking, however, to be 'effective and efficient in promoting learning' (p2) and progress. Wilshaw himself, as reported by Vaughan (2014), had written to all inspectors when he had heard that the respective reports of Peal and Waldegrave and Simons were in preparation. He was famously 'spitting blood'. This is the Christmas 'spat' referred to above.

The increasingly intense national focus on pupil data, particularly on progress and how teaching and feedback help promote it, engendered this row. The absence of individual lesson grades had allegedly led to a range of new marking policies in schools (Marwood, 2014). Jack Marwood's blogs on the NUT site (www.teachers.org) are worth reading as an illustration of how 'what Ofsted wants' continues to shape practice in at least some schools. He laments the practice of what he calls 'triple marking', whereby a piece of work is marked, the pupil makes a written response, and then the teacher in turn writes back. This is ostensibly to demonstrate to the Ofsted Inspector how marking here has promoted pupil progress - the key indicator now rather than raw attainment by itself. Hence this particular 'clarification' that has now been incorporated into the new Common Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2015f).

'What Ofsted wants' may be better understood as what heads and teachers *think* it wants, as has always been the case, but this does not necessarily help classroom teachers. As inspectors will look at children's work in order to assess the progress being made, this is bound to put marking under a harsh focus, directly related to actual practice.

More broadly the overall grade for the school (and teaching) remains crucial in terms of possible intervention into the school and future individual careers. The change in the 'satisfactory' grading, now designated as 'requires improvement', discussed above, obviously provides an extra pressure. Given also, as experienced inspectors explained in the interviews, more is now expected to achieve a good or outstanding verdict than before, Ofsted have instigated a major professional change as part of a general 'ratcheting up of standards' that includes the increasing floor targets set by the Secretary of State.

So this is the framework, or disciplinary regime (Hall and Noyes, 2009), for English schools. The focus on data generally and pupil progress in particular are clearly vital, particularly within the context of such inequity in outcomes for young people in English schools, by social class, ethnic origin and gender (see Riddell 2016 for a detailed discussion of this). Whether Ofsted inspection

itself as a process *promotes* improvement for disadvantaged young people, for example, now measured by the Ever6FSM indicator, would need to be part of a much wider empirical evaluation. But it certainly draws attention to it: league tables of the attainment gap were sent out by Ofsted in 2015 and at least one Ofsted Regional Director wrote to all schools where there was more than a twenty percentage point gap between disadvantaged students and the others, asking how they were going to address it. Some of these schools were outstanding and so would not be subject to a routine inspection, so it is not clear how they might respond or who would do anything about it.

Nevertheless, the annual Report and Accounts presented to Parliament (Ofsted, 2015c: 4) by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector headlined some of the findings from an earlier survey of school leaders' views:

- Most headteachers (82%) reported that the benefits of inspection outweighed the pressures of being inspected.
- Around nine out of ten (92%) thought the inspection judgments were fair and accurate.
- Almost all of the headteachers (98%) said that they use the inspection recommendations to improve their school.

There is a lot to say about these data too, but they provide a useful context for the inspectors' views gathered for this paper.

Interview data and discussion

So, as explained, seventeen inspectors were interviewed largely by telephone over the 2014/15 academic year with some face-to-face where travel was relatively easy. These interviewees represent an opportunity sample and some consideration is given later in the paper to the nature of the wider systemic conclusions that may be drawn. Nevertheless, their interviews do give some fascinating insights to wider developments in the polity that will be touched on here.

The inspectors came from a wide range of backgrounds, including serving and ex-primary, secondary and special headteachers, serving and ex-LA officers, ex-HMI and interviewees in a variety of private sector roles. They were variously involved in development and support work with schools, in all phases, and even where serving LA officers, on an individual contracted basis. Some of the interviewees were working in the local authorities already covered for the my wider research, giving helpfully complementary and in some cases contrasting views of developments there. Again, these are considered in more detail in Riddell (2016).

HMCI – I originally thought - had stated the intention of reestablishing the old District HMI role whereby each local authority had a senior Ofsted inspector that managed the relationship between the two organisations. In fact, the role does not exist in this form and therefore an interview was not held with such a person. However, salaried members of the inspectorate do have such a liaison role I learned, drawing on the expertise of other phase specialisms when appropriate.

The principal points arising from the interviews were as follows.

Frequency of inspection
This particular group of inspectors undertook differing numbers of inspections each year, ranging from ‘at least one a week’ in some years by an inspector coming from a learning and skills (and EFL) background, through leading one a fortnight (an extremely experienced teacher, head of department, teacher trainer and consultant, including abroad), down to one a term (since 1997) from a retired primary headteacher. An ex-local authority officer did just ‘two a year’ and one serving local authority officer did none. She, although Ofsted-trained (ie by one of the ISPs) just did not have the time.

An employee of an ISP said that in 2014 it was ‘definitely noticeable’ that fewer of the additional inspectors were coming forward to do inspections. Even then some of the AIs on the ISP’s books would only do one a year, while at the same time others would do eight a term. She also mentioned that some AIs asked to join teams were refusing in greater numbers than ever before. As a consequence, other AIs were expected to join teams at short notice, including one I interviewed who could not make the first interview I agreed with her because she had just been asked to join a inspection team at twenty four hours’ notice.

It does need to be born in mind that some AIs, including some I interviewed, did inspection work for more than one ISP. But overall, this means that the (then) contracted work force for inspections, not just those interviewed, had variable contact with Ofsted. This is not a question of professional commitment. But with the varying nature of the agreed inspection frameworks this must affect the quality of inspections because of professional experience and repeated inspection practice. This may have been one of the unstated reasons for the 2015 changes, but the author has heard concerns informally from Ofsted about the quality of some inspectors, and the ISP employee interviewed maintained that HMCI himself had been behind the drive to reduce the numbers of inspectors.

Wider contributions to the system - reasons for inspecting
The expectations of inspectors from Ofsted have ‘changed out of all proportion considering the time involved and the payment’, according to one lead inspector interviewed. For headteacher inspectors, even with a small number of inspections, this meant preparing and writing at weekends even when they had deputies in acting up capacities. Although two of those interviewed said that they had now decided to not do inspections (this was irrespective of the changing arrangements), one from age (late 70s), most interviewed stated positive reasons for being involved.

For those who were now working as ‘sole traders’, as another described it, that is, undertaking a range of consultancy and support roles with schools or local authorities, ‘having the Ofsted badge makes you marketable’. Many interviewed in this category, but by no means all, had had some previous local authority experience of one sort or another, for example as School

Improvement Advisers (SIAs) or Schools Improvement Partners (SIPs), often over many years. How they came to be doing consultancy was in itself interesting. Some had been made redundant following local authority restructurings or service changes necessitated by cuts: local authorities overall suffered 40% cuts in central government grants between 2010 and 2015 (LGA, 2014). As one senior local authority officer said, such severe cuts 'make you more strategic, don't they?'.

What remains in local authorities – though this may have changed again in many places since these interviews took place – varies considerably. The former role of SIA – a paid employee of the local authority to help discharge its statutory responsibilities and provide support, advice and challenge to schools on a retained or paid for basis – does not exist in the same way it did ten years ago. Then LAs generally had a range of experienced staff – often ex-heads or deputies themselves - employed on a permanent basis to do this work. Now, according to these interviewees and others I have spoken to, some LAs retain a small central team 'to work strategically with schools' as one officer put it, together with a budget to employ some of these 'sole traders' for so many days a year to 'do [for example] performance management'. Others have central teams that can 'signpost' schools to individuals or organisations that could provide appropriate skills or knowledge. These colleagues worked for schools on other days on a day by day basis, sometimes as their SIPs where they were independent of the local authority and were under no obligation to pass on information to the local authority through, for example, a 'visit note'.

Some local authorities have outsourced their school improvement services altogether, to a private sector company such as Babcock's (at least two large shire counties), a limited company with the Council holding the only share, or a specially created organisation such as an independent provident society. These various arrangements ensured on a fee-paying basis that staff previously trusted by schools could still be available to them. For some of these authorities, however, this meant that they knew little of their schools – a view confirmed by an ISP employee and an experienced Ofsted inspector. So much so that in one Ofsted Inspector's view some of them no longer had a school improvement function at all.

Even those that did may know little - on the basis of one SIA day a year - irrespective of their wider 'contextual data' of which many LAs are proud. Certainly, this might very well mean that crises, for example, after a change in leadership of a school serving a challenging area, would not be picked up either by the LA or an academy chain if there was one involved. As one headteacher said about a school she had inspected – an academy this time – 'something had gone wrong but no one had picked it up'. The vulnerability of the school that had already attained a 'good' grade, even with the new inspection arrangements, could only be picked up every three years, but 'no one wants to listen to this stuff' as the ISP employee said. An annual RAISEonline-based risk assessment process would not pick this up either, and an outstanding school may not be seen for years and years - including

some I visited - although 5% of them are inspected every year. These are important systemic issues and not just in the purview of Ofsted, of course.

A feature of many LA teams – for some years and before the recent changes under the Coalition Government - has been the presence of headteachers seconded for so many days a year, or recently retired headteachers retained similarly. This helped address the credibility issue cited by many interviewees about the wider raising standards project: having support from or working with people who 'understood my context', as one primary headteacher in the midlands said, but that also meant those who were inspecting. One ex-LA officer did express a view counter to this however that although context was clearly important, there was one national framework to be applied 'without fear or favour'. Another AI said this helped her be 'fair and ensure progress'. Having 'serving practitioners' inspecting schools (Ofsted, 2015d), is clearly desirable in a 'self-improving system', however, as a retired primary headteacher said with over twenty years of headship experience, and Ofsted intends 70% of its school inspectors to be such from September, 2015, as noted.

Consultants who were inspecting came from serving in schools, for example at deputy head level. And in this sample, nearly all those working for academy chains had come through this route rather than via LA service. But for all of them, besides the engagement on performance management, the flavour of their work in schools was very much focused on preparation for, and follow up work from, Ofsted inspection, including a lot of data analysis. So this is clearly Hall and Noyes' (2009) disciplinary regime.

For all the headteacher inspectors interviewed, there were similar advantages expressed. As one secondary head said, it is good to know the 'current framework and what it is all about'. For another it was about 'seeing over the horizon'. It was good to understand each update and have a 'finger on the pulse' for another. And a primary headteacher expressed the view that joining an inspection team was the 'best professional development (he) had ever had', a point echoed by others.

Besides helping their own schools prepare for inspection, however, headteacher inspectors talked about the 'privilege' of seeing practices in other schools that were 'just amazing' and of the fact that they can 'all go blind in our own schools', that is, lose sight of what may not be so good in the familiarity of their own settings. You can become 'too isolated in your own school', as the secondary head said, making another systemic comment. And some things she had seen – for example timetabling 100 minute lessons once a fortnight – made her think 'where does it work well', 'where would it work here' and about 'things you would not want to do at all'. One very experienced lead inspector did say, however, that she did not like having headteachers in her teams because all they did was compare what they were observing with their own schools.

The headteachers interviewed here were all in outstanding schools and were either National Leaders of Education (NLEs) or Local Leaders of Education

(LLEs), accredited through the National College for Teaching and Leadership process. They, and other 'well-positioned' heads (Coldron *et al*, 2014) I interviewed over the past three years or so were therefore involved in a range of 'system leadership' roles with other schools. They could be brought (and bought) in by local authorities, academy chains, governing bodies, SIPs and, more recently, Regional Schools Commissioners.

The full range of this work cannot be described adequately here, but without exception, all the headteachers involved described a positive model of working with other schools and how they all took things back to try in their own schools from the ones they were working with, even when they had been judged 'inadequate'. One of the primary LLE heads interviewed for this paper said that he did not feel it was always sensible to start by 'looking at Ofsted and what was wrong', even though the engagement was 'at the end of the day' about getting from 'RI to good'. He would ask about the balance between 'Ofsted and what else you want to do'. In another part of the country, an academy head described how he would say to a school he had been asked to work with that they could 'by all means' come and see how they did things in his own school, but it might not work with them. Another primary head again talked at length about the need to build up the confidence of staff after a poor Ofsted verdict before the 'real improvement' could begin.

The inconsistent quality of Ofsted inspection

An-ex longstanding special head, who had 'done over 80 inspections and not once had a bad experience, [didn't] believe the stories' about inconsistency. Every other interviewee had comments to make and could see how it might happen.

The comments of an ex-HMI (and ex-primary head) about the nature of inspection frame the others well. Because of his experience, he always led the inspections he was involved in. He described the 'heart of the inspection process [as] looking at the data and making a judgment…[and looking] at the progress children are making on the day by looking at children's work'. He would examine and judge the marking and make a judgment on 'how strategic [it was] enabling the children to take the next steps'. But essentially, he said, he would meet staff in the school and discuss how he should interpret the data 'triangulating all the time'. Then came the nub - he made a professional judgment, asking himself 'what was the best thing for the school. Sometimes this is a pat on the back even though the data is wobbly or on the contrary the school is insecure with good data.' Sometimes though a school would need a 'short sharp shock'. He looked for 'cups half full'.

His observations on what could go wrong were also interesting. Less experienced inspectors, including serving heads, he said, may stick to the 'letter of the framework' and handbook (which incudes the criteria for judgment) because they do not always recognise the 'wriggle room' within grades - from being almost outstanding to being nearly requiring improvement within grade 2. Other interviewees - an ex-LA adviser and a primary head (Riddell, 2016) - described schools as being cuspy in this and the other grades. And another inspector, also an ex-primary head with nearly thirty

years' experience, spoke of heads coming in with a limited time commitment – because of the effects on their schools – that in turn limited their experience of inspection and by implication their quality. Finally, this ex-HMI felt that others should 'stop inspecting because they had been out of school far too long'.

Another inspector referred to the inspection process as 'collaborative, working alongside the staff' who should be involved as much as possible. It was important that the staff did not feel that inspection 'was being done to [them… and that] they had an opportunity to present the school's work'. If there was a problem with, say, marking, then the inspection team should demonstrate their data so that staff would 'accept the verdict'.

This was a common view. An ex-LA adviser said that in an 'excellent (inspection) team' the task was to 'get in to the school, build a relationship with the school and don't do it to them'. In her experience, it was rare to leave a school 'without the head saying 'we don't like the verdict, but we are satisfied with the way you got there'. But another very experienced inspector – in his seventies and now ceasing inspecting – had been considered 'too friendly' according to him by his managers. He himself regarded the 'biggest obstacle to consistency [was] people coming in with tremendous autonomy [that sometimes gave them] a sense of power'. He said he always bore in mind that 'this person has had a sleepless night because of me'. He 'worked hard on the dialogue' and ideally would like them to be 'thanking Ofsted for the way [he] handled putting them in to special measures' when necessary. But he currently had concerns about having the 'appropriate data' to judge progress.

Another ex-LA adviser while having little sympathy for 'tough schools [that said] the inspection just did not understand their context' (she clearly did) when there was a national framework, described how in her view 'a lot of people have been trained to lead who aren't very good at it'. Further, 'teachers don't always make the best inspectors'.

There were comments about how headteacher team members might lead to inconsistent judgments. There is the time issue for heads, already raised, that is, how limited the time actually is for which they can be away from their own schools, so that their concentration may be limited. But the experienced lead inspector quoted in the last section also added that heads of outstanding schools often expected too much of schools they were inspecting, whereas another felt that sometimes NLEs and LLEs were 'far too generous'! There is obviously some inconsistency at some of the process here!

Other inspectors described the process of putting together the inspection team as a possible reason for inconsistency. One, an experienced education consultant gave examples of being given two or even one day's notice of joining a team by the ISP (as above) when they had difficulty recruiting – obviously only those with portfolio lives could respond to such a request. Another extremely experienced lead inspector and ex-LA adviser described how in one instance he was 'sent' a primary specialist by the ISP to look at

the sixth form. Yet another described the difficulties of ISPs that ‘seem to be always struggling to get inspectors’ (see the ISP employee comments above).

This AI also described various problems with the quality assurance after the inspection when a ‘reader’ is sent a copy of the draft inspection report as part of the quality assurance process. His opinion was that readers ‘disagree a lot’ and had got ‘tougher and tougher’ - the ‘criteria were too harsh’. Readers make ‘judgments from the desk’. He related various telephone conversations including one where he could not ‘convince the [the reader] that in a school… where a small number of children were making poor progress… The rest were doing really well’. It made him question the point of actually visiting the school. His judgment was overturned so he sent a copy of his original report to the headteacher.

Interestingly, a headteacher I interviewed separately whose school had just received an RI judgment reporting overhearing his lead inspector have a heated telephone conversation ‘with Ofsted’ about whether the school was good or not – the previous verdict. And another AI also complained of this sort of inconsistency.

Finally, another Ofsted Inspector with whom I had an email exchange after sending out an earlier draft of this paper for comment said that she agreed with these comments about the QA process, but some of the readers had also been ‘removed’ post-September 2015 who did not have qualified teacher status.

Ofsted and development work

There are a few comments to make about inspectors being involved in development work though most of these insights came from an ISP employees and a private sector consultant. In principle, it seems odd for any individual to undertake development work in a school (or any other organisation for that matter) and then be responsible for reporting publicly on the progress that school has made because of that development work. But there seem to be at least elements of that in the current arrangements.

According to the ISP employee, Sir Michael Wilshaw ‘HMCI has gone down the school improvement route’. After the change from satisfactory to requires improvement from September 2012, ‘getting to good’ – named possibly after the famed Jim Collins (2001) book – has been a theme of HMI’s work. After receiving an RI verdict, but where leadership is good, schools are invited to attend a getting to good seminar, run by HMI, put on several times a year in different parts of the country. The programme is available from the GOV.UK site.

If however leadership is not good there will be follow up visits. I was informed that usually this would be one such by HMI, but have heard from some of the inspectors that this could be three, possibly complementing any system leadership resources brokered by LAs or more recently by Regional Schools Commissioners. There may also have been a *change* in leadership and, according to the Prime Minister under the new Conservative Government

(Cameron, 2015), a forced academy conversion. Overall, this would seem to be rather *some* - but not exclusive - involvement by HMI in the improvement process.

Nevertheless, the issue of 'Ofsted inspecting Ofsted' was raised with me and apparently the ISPs had said to HMCI that this was not appropriate work for them (the ISPs) to undertake. A different HMI team now undertakes such reinspections after a getting to good process.

It is possible that this pattern of involvement has been changing from Autumn 2015 as I have learned that senior inspectors are concerned about Ofsted's overall capacity in the light of continuing and severe budget cuts, but it is too early to tell. Ofsted have by no means been immune to the civil service cuts that began under the Gordon Brown Government in the late 2000s. These cuts have framed the continuing development of the Ofsted Inspection Framework that has not been able to propose work Ofsted could not sustain. AIs said that fewer HMI now led inspections because of monitoring requirements and this may also be an indicator of this.

The rules for Ofsted inspectors current at the time of the interviews were that they were not permitted to undertake development work in schools that they had inspected – this would constitute another albeit different conflict of interest as inspectors could then be seen to be creating work for themselves. ISPs themselves did not bid as companies for consultancy work with schools in their inspection areas. Obviously this too may have changed from 2015.

For many of the AIs I interviewed there was a mutual interdependency between the two facets of their work, as noted above – undertaking inspection gave authority and marketability to their work as a consultant, and consulting often gave them additional insights into how schools work outside the focus of the accountability regime. The ISP employee I interviewed reported that her ISP had directly instructed its AIs not to do such work and an AI I interviewed who was affected by this said that the ISP had further said it would monitor their development activities, including on social media.

Conclusion

The conclusions that can be drawn from these data need to be circumscribed. First of all, I do not know what the interviewees represent overall in terms of their age profile or experience compared to the profile of inspectors more generally. They represent a self-selected opportunity sample: although the three former ISPs carried short AI biographies on their websites, the lists of new Ofsted Inspectors – 1200 inspectors lighter - were not available for comparison at the tome of writing. And to develop a real feel for the nature of inspection it would also be necessary to know the frequency of inspecting by phase and school Ofsted status for all inspectors.

Second, nonetheless, there was a considerable amount of agreement among these inspectors on key topics, especially the nature, conduct and importance of inspection. I would add that the discussions I had about the alleged inconsistency of and *variability* of the inspection process demonstrated how

this might arise. This is not the same as saying it does. And it is not known whether the new inspectors recruited for Autumn 2015 have included some who exercised 'professional judgment' about schools' trajectories - before they applied the strict requirements of the framework - such as the ex-HMI I interviewed. I did learn informally that Ofsted had been concerned about some inspectors – as noted - and at least one of the ISPs. Further insight into this process might be given by the conduct of inspections reported from September 2015, although such data will remain informal at best.

The inspectors who were not in school leadership positions were at that stage of their careers – close to or post-retirement – where they could afford to do the work with its diminishing pay rates to supplement other income. Only one inspector, doing an inspection every two weeks, was full time and he was definitely retiring at the time of interview. It would be a pity if these colleagues' experience were lost to schools altogether if not selected to be new Ofsted Inspectors, but not being current in inspection would affect their professional credibility as a number said and noted above. Some who have not got through the process reported great dissatisfaction with the way it had been managed.

One of the interesting aspects of the work of those colleagues who were portfolio workers was how many said that they worked by word of mouth, although a small number were associates of consultancies, that is, worked for them on a contracted daily basis. Some of this word of mouth worked school by school - the positive reputation of some being passed on from headteacher to headteacher. One of the inspectors quoted above explained how he had 'picked up' work in several schools in a south west town on the basis of work done in one of the area's secondary schools. One other was allocated work through an academy chain and another said there is 'really no point in advertising'. Others have been discharging the role of SIA for some LAs, but they too are bought in. LA staff do not generally do these roles any more as also noted.

Whatever their current intentions and energies, these colleagues will come to retirement at some time soon. Their expertise will therefore be lost to schools, posing the system question of who or what will replace them, especially those who left LAs. The answer, in terms of a self-improving system, will eventually be system leaders – NLEs, LLEs, SLEs – who can advertise their strengths and those of their schools on the National College website and, from interviews conducted for the wider piece of work I have undertaken, receive approaches from other schools on that basis. The nature of school support will eventually change from the rich networks that at least some headteachers have built up over the past few years, as LAs wither away, to something more systemic, though this is not imminent everywhere.

Recruiting more system leaders and developing capacity more generally, especially to be deployed for schools at risk - to be identified now by casting a much wider net when announced legislation is passed - falls to the recently appointed Regional Schools Commissioners, possibly with LAs. Sir Michael Wilshaw (Ofsted, 2015d) when he himself initiated the inspection changes being implemented this September – according to an ISP employee – did not

just have concerns about quality but the need to involve more school and system leaders in inspection. NLEs are *expected* to undertake Ofsted training - managed by Ofsted itself now rather than ISPs – but there is a limit for the reasons given above to the number of inspections that can be done by headteachers. So a lot more will be needed. That means that, until system capacity reaches a point where all inspections can be undertaken by system leaders – so long as they are not inspecting their own support work – there will be a need for the colleagues such as those I interviewed.

There remains work to be done for inspection. I am personally continually surprised by the descriptions of poor schools encountered given by inspectors and others, nearly a quarter of a century since Ofsted began its work. The point will not be laboured here, but in itself this indicates the lack of supervision – or at least monitoring – of schools in some areas by LAs. Identifying schools at risk is not always done adequately by anyone currently, including academy chains. This is an issue for equity given how poor attainment is a key social process for transmitting disadvantage (NAO, 2015). There remains the question of whether a two day inspection actually helps improve a school. One inspector said it does for some – because 'they are so bad'.

For other schools that have achieved national benchmarks, as these change, there is a need to provide a different sort of mechanism to encourage and support improvement that is owned by the schools and is not just an external 'racheting up'. I have argued elsewhere (2016) for the new supervision and intervention arrangements managed through the RSCs to be seen as the first stage of a move towards a system based more on trust – networks rather than hierarchies – as advocated by Hargreaves (2012). But this poses the question of what the Ofsted inspection model should be like.

I learned informally while conducting these interviews that Ofsted itself had expected to be reviewed whichever government was in power after 2015. This has not happened as yet and – at this point – does not seem imminent either. But one model to consider is that of *Challenge Partners* (see www.challengepartners.org), an organisation that grew out of the London Challenge. The reviews it undertakes are done by a team of peers – including one of the inspectors I interviewed - whereby according to him, very challenging findings can be heard, received and hence acted upon by the schools being reviewed. They go much deeper than inspection currently, it was claimed, though I have not had time to follow this up at the time of writing. But the team is larger than that for inspection. So although entirely consistent with the notion of a school-led system, this would require further thought and possibly resources for it to become frequent and national. It deserves consideration.

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