

**KNOWLEDGE, AUTHORITY AND JUDGEMENT:  
THE CHANGING PRACTICES OF SCHOOL INSPECTION IN ENGLAND**

**JACQUELINE BAXTER**

jacqueline.baxter@open.ac.uk | Open University, United Kingdom

**JOHN CLARKE**

john.clarke@open.ac.uk | Open University, United Kingdom

**ABSTRACT**

School Inspection involves the construction and mobilisation of particular conceptions of knowledge, judgement and expertise. These constructions change over time and between different inspection regimes. In this paper we explore some of the shifting criteria and practices of inspection that have been visible in the recent development of school inspection in England as organised through the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). At stake in these processes are the shifting relationships between different types of knowledge (not least data and observation); the types of expertise and authority understood to be embodied in the inspector; and the forms of judgement that are exercised in inspection. In the work of Ofsted, these changing constructions and mobilisations of knowledge are also linked to the changing practices and criteria used in the evaluation of school performance: most dramatically the reclassification of the evaluation grade of 'satisfactory' to 'requires improvement'. The paper explores the political and governmental pressures that drive changes in the construction and mobilisation of knowledge in school inspection and consider what new problems may arise as a consequence of such changes.

**KEY WORDS**

Knowledge; Evidence; Expertise; Authority; Judgement;  
Evaluation criteria; Discourses; Practices.



**SISYPHUS**

**JOURNAL OF EDUCATION**

**VOLUME 2, ISSUE 1,**

**2014, PP. 106-127**

# Knowledge, Authority and Judgement: The Changing Practices of School Inspection in England

*Jacqueline Baxter | John Clarke*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper begins with a description of the ways in which knowledge and evidence are understood in the context of this paper. It continues by exploring the ways in which inspection discourses of knowledge and evidence in the English context impact upon the wider community. Drawing on data from research on inspection in England, we explore how differing forms of knowledge and evidence influence the discourse of inspection and equally the ways in which inspection discourses influence which elements of knowledge and evidence are privileged at any one time.

## KNOWLEDGE AND EVIDENCE IN INSPECTION

In this paper we draw upon Foucauldian thinking about knowledge in which knowledge is understood as the product of a series of complementary and conflicting discourses that evolve and mutate over time. In this discursive field, different forms of knowledge may compete with one another in a space of practice, helping to define and give meaning to its practices, relationships



and ordering. Foucault stresses the process of constituting a form of «collective consciousness»:

between the simultaneous and successive phenomena of a given period a community of meanings, symbolic links, an interplay of resemblance and reflection which allows the sovereignty of collective consciousness to emerge as the principle of unity and explanation (Foucault, 1969, p. 24).

From this perspective, the discourses that claim the authoritative status of truth (and become the accepted and authoritative knowledge about the field) can be examined through analyses which reveal the underlying hegemonic or dominant belief systems that come to underpin particular actions and empower the actors who perform them. Although this perspective considers the temporal and historical elements of the discourse, it draws upon the idea that discourse «must not refer to the distant presence of the origin, but treated as and when it occurs» (ibid, p. 28). To put it another way, this is an analytic orientation to discourse in practice, and to discourse as practice. This view of knowledge permits a diachronic analysis of the breaks within discourse: the points at which, due to historical, cultural and political contextual conditions, discourses of knowledge begin to shift, leading to both new forms of knowledge (and ways of knowing) in particular contexts while also illuminating the ways in which these discourses are resisted and shaped by references to the past.

These understandings also draw upon inspection in the wider context: conceptualized and acted out within a 'fluid policy space that encompasses national and transnational contexts and their interactions. Examining how they interpret, mediate and translate into action, transnational performance based knowledge' (Grek, Lawn, Ozga & Segerholm, 2013, p. 2). In this study, we treat inspectors as actors who both interpret and enact discursive interpretations of policies whilst concomitantly shaping the perceptions of those being inspected. Through this they negotiate political blocs, build alliances, negotiate and reconcile interests, and assemble projects that define the direction and purpose of governing within a specific field of practice (see Clarke, 2012). This implies thinking of inspectors as actors, located and formed by specific governmental contexts and concerns. Our approach is framed by an interest in how specific forms of knowledge and ways of knowing are articulated in practice and with how they are embodied and enacted.

As a consequence, we approach the issue of evidence — or more accurately, the varieties of evidence — as pointing to the ways in which «performance is made visible and transparent» (Ozga, 2011, p. 5) not only to those who seek to govern performance but also in the wider context of the ways in which this evidence is privileged within the work of governance. Public perceptions of the legitimacy of forms of evidence are in play in the operation of instruments of governing. Inspection, like other governing practices, involves articulations of ways of knowing, forms of knowledge, types of evidence that seek to be authoritative. Here we draw on the work of Ernest House who argues that all evaluation is a form of persuasion (1980, p. 71). In offering a performative understanding of evaluation, House distinguishes differing forms of evidence according to the contexts in which they are generated, stating that:

Evaluations themselves can be no more than acts of persuasion. Although sometimes evaluators promise Cartesian proof, the certainty of proof and conclusiveness that the public expects, the definitive evaluation is rarely (...) subject to serious scrutiny, evaluations always appear equivocal (House, 1980, p. 72).

House helpfully points to the rhetorical and persuasive character of evaluation, always striving to claim certainty, truth and objectivity. However, as he suggests, such claims are necessarily potentially vulnerable to scrutiny, challenge and sceptical distance. In the field of school inspection, such vulnerabilities are recurrent, contributing to a cyclical process of change in search of the improvements in method and judgement that might overcome such vulnerabilities and the ‘credibility gap’ they engender. In drawing on these understandings of forms of evidence as tools that are deployed to convince and persuade, we examine how understandings of knowledge and evidence shift and combine with persuasive discourses and normative assumptions around the purpose, function and articulation of inspection within England’s particular political and governmental context.



## THE STUDY: GOVERNING BY INSPECTION

This paper draws on data from the ESRC project: *Governing by Inspection*.<sup>1</sup> The project explores the ways in which national systems of school inspection operate within their own jurisdictions and how they intersect with international organisations such as the Standing International Conference on Inspection (SICI) to create sites for the interaction of «global, European, UK and local policy» providing a space for the investigation of «the influence of historically embedded assumptions and beliefs on the mediation of global policy trends» (Grek et al., 2013, p. 1).

As part of the research design, a series of local cases was undertaken in each country), while also exploring the work and development of the three national systems of school inspection. In common with a number of multi-country case studies, researchers in the field seek, ‘the ordinary happenings for each case, investigating settings and following the range of value commitments’ (Stake, 2006, p. 29). The multiple case study approach ‘begins with recognising what concept or idea binds the case studies together’ (ibid., p. 23). In this study this was achieved by analyzing national data in the form of thematic and policy documentation concerning school inspection in combination with local inspection data, drawing upon analysis of 50 inspection reports in each local setting. We also conducted interviews with national and local actors (inspectors of different kinds, local authority School Improvement Advisors and head teachers).<sup>2</sup> The interviews were analysed using a coding structure emanating from themes emerging from Nvivo analysis of data, in combination with discourse analytical methods (Fairclough, 2001, 2009). Documentary evidence was analysed using established techniques based on political discourse analysis (Chilton, 2003), combined with media analytic techniques which view official discourse as fulfilling both operational and political functions as an intermediary between media and policy (Burton & Carlen, 1979; Fitzgerald & Housley, 2009).

1 *Governing by inspection: School inspection and Education Governance in Scotland, England and Sweden* (ESRC: RES 062232241A) and the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsradet). The authors acknowledge the funding and support of the research councils concerned.

2 The English system includes Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMIs) directly employed by Ofsted and a large subcontracted workforce of inspectors who provide the bulk of the staffing for inspection teams. The work of recruiting, training and managing these inspectors is subcontracted by Ofsted to three organizations: Serco, Tribal and CfBT.

## SHIFTING CRITERIA: THE ENGLISH SYSTEM OF INSPECTION

The English inspectorate for education has been in existence since 1839 when it was introduced as an accountability measure to ensure that funds from Parliamentary grants awarded to schools were being used appropriately (Maclure, 2000). The inspectorate continued to develop in response to government requirements for ever greater accountability within the education sector until Ofsted (The Office for Standards in Education) was established by the 1992 Education (Schools) Act (Parliament, 1992). The period leading up to the creation of the new agency was characterised by an increasing suspicion of the role and power of the inspectorate combined with growing levels of government mistrust of the public sector in general, reflecting Clarke's argument that:

[when] governments strive to reform public services and produce 'improvements', they encounter an increasingly sceptical public, unwilling to believe things they are told by politicians. Evaluation systems and agencies promise a way out of this paradox of government: independent and expert agencies that can assess performance and its improvement 'at arm's length' from government (Clarke, 2008, p. 123).

The new agency was granted far greater regulatory powers than its predecessor. It has employed a succession of frameworks in order to evaluate school performance (Ofsted, 1993, 2005, 2009b, 2012b, 2012c), judging it according to the grades: outstanding, good, satisfactory or inadequate. The 'satisfactory' judgement was changed to 'requires improvement' in September 2012 in order to reflect the vigorously articulated sense of dissatisfaction among politicians and some educationalists with the term 'satisfactory' (Garner, 2012). 'Satisfactory' was viewed by both the Secretary of State for Education and the new Chief Inspector as too generous a judgement of underperforming schools, contributing to a perpetuation of 'coasting' schools: those that made little effort to improve (Burns, 2011; Paton, 2012).

In deploying this framework of judgement, Ofsted and its inspection teams have constituted discourses of excellence in schooling and accompanying discourses of failure. Schools that have been identified as outstanding have become 'beacons of good practice', attracting attention from the media, the government, parents and students alike. Beset by attention, oversubscribed,



their head teachers lionised and their cultures emulated by schools throughout England, such schools have become hegemonic representations of educational excellence (for further discussion see Baxter & Clarke, 2013). At the same time, the judgement of being a ‘failing school’ has powerful effects within communities, reducing property values and leading to an exodus of those families who can afford to move house in order to send their children elsewhere:

After property, good schools must be the UK’s most popular obsession. It should come as no surprise then, that the performance results of state schools within the catchment area of your property will have a direct effect on its value (Howard, 2012).

This points to the complicated social (and economic) dynamics that have followed the invention of a distinctive quasi-market in schooling in England. One head of an ‘outstanding’ school pointed to some of the ramifications this may have within local areas:

I think that the term «requires improvement» is a notice to improve, that’s what it is. Parents [in a local school] were very, very concerned about the notice to improve, but there is nowhere for their kids to go. I got a lot of requests for people to send their kids here, but we are full, massively full, and to be honest, I don’t want the refugees. The sort of people who want to bale out are exactly the sort of people who ought to stay there to get the place back on its feet (EP22).

Following from House’s idea of evaluation as persuasion, the discourses created by the inspectorate aim to create a bridge between education policy and definitions of school success that establishes a schema, a frame or a way of understanding educational attainment in England. These discourses function as theoretical constructs and are articulated in official documents such as inspection reports and thematic documents (see for example Ofsted, 1999, 2003) in order to create what Chilton terms a «neutral reality» (2003, p. 51) which the public are enjoined to accept by the nature of its purportedly impartial and objective stance. Ofsted recurrently and rhetorically insists on its independence, for example: «We prize our independence and we report impartially» (Ofsted, 2009a, p. 2).

The discourses also possess a dynamogenic element, mobilizing both affective and metacognitive responses in order to create a temporal discourse of

progression in which both public and teaching profession take up their roles in a journey towards success (for further discussion see Baxter & Clarke, 2012). This vision of success and raised standards often fails to define what successful education is within today's society, preferring instead to focus on a distant point on the horizon in which English education will be the best in the world. As Chilton points out, political discourses often employ kinesthetic metaphors in order to create frames for:

indirectly experienced concepts such as time, plans, purposes and policies. Political concepts involving leadership and political action conceptualized by movement or journey metaphors and including systematic expressions such as coming to a cross roads, moving ahead towards a better future, not deviating from plans... (Chilton, 2003, p. 45).

The articulation of these discourses occurs directly through a variety of media: inspection reports, thematic reports (Ofsted, 1999, 2003), web based media and press releases from both the agency and Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (Paton, 2012). There are also more indirect means, ranging from training sessions in which teacher delegates are prepared for inspection, handbooks such as *The Perfect Ofsted Inspection* and *The Perfect Ofsted Lesson* (Beere, 2011, 2012), to national and international conferences in which the system of inspection in England is introduced to international audiences. Our analysis of these texts, transcripts and observation notes reveals the normative elements of inspection discourses: elements that derive from the way in which inspection has come to be farmed and deployed within an English political and governmental context. One of these texts, *The Perfect Ofsted Inspection* by Jackie Beere (Beere, 2011), demonstrates the extent to which pedagogical discourses have become entangled with Ofsted requirements. The book's emphasis appears to be on presenting one's school in the best possible light, underlining the performative character of inspection. It is described as «a highly practical and comprehensive guide that will ensure that you show your school and its achievements at its best» (Beere, 2011, p. 1). The book attempts to bridge the discourse between inspection and pedagogical practice by creating a mix of advice as to what constitutes good teaching, with a practical view of how to persuade the inspector that your lessons are indeed outstanding. For example, the author describes how to make an immediate impact upon the inspector:



The primacy effect suggests that first impressions are so powerful that they can override objective judgements. The primacy effect for your students occurs in the first six seconds of your lesson. In an observation the first six seconds of an inspector's visit to your classroom will be influential. Getting brains engaged immediately pays dividends (Beere, 2011, p. 53).

It is this combination of ideas of what constitutes good teaching alongside the performative requirement to 'make an impact' on the inspector that contributes to such a perplexing culture in terms of the way in which knowledge is understood in inspection. What are inspectors expected to observe — and how are they to judge what they see and hear?

#### SHIFTING KNOWLEDGES: WHAT DO INSPECTORS KNOW?

The question of inspectorial judgement is further complicated by recent decisions to re-model the inspection workforce. Attributable partly to a number of government inquiries and partly to the inspectorate's enhanced focus on school improvement (Ofsted, 2012c, 2012f), the three sub-contracted inspection agencies are now tasked with recruiting in-service school leaders from good and outstanding schools to be part of inspection teams. These individuals, acting as self-employed inspectors, are asked to undertake a minimum of one inspection per term. Employing in-service professionals as inspectors has brought another dimension to the type of knowledge that is valued within educational inspection: teacher knowledge or head teacher knowledge (Baxter, 2013a).

Some of the head teachers who we interviewed were enthusiastic about this move, seeing it as overcoming some of the distance between inspectors and schools, and bringing relevant knowledge of running a school into the inspection process. For example, one head teacher said «I worry about the quality of inspectors... I look at people on courses and think: Would I want that person coming into my school and making a judgement?» (HT1). This headteacher was particularly troubled by the lack of contemporary experience of schools, pointing to the length of time that had elapsed since some inspectors had been in a school except as inspectors. She thought this made such inspectors more likely to make judgements that ignored the specifics of the school under inspection. Others talked about the importance of current expe-

rience of running a school as a critical resource for inspections — and for the schools being inspected. One informant suggested that such experience could reduce the ‘inconsistencies’ visible in inspection judgements that reflected a focus on process rather than attention to the context (HT3). However, asking professionals to draw upon their knowledge while performing at most one inspection per term has implications for the way in which this knowledge lends itself to the work of inspection (for further discussion see Baxter & Clarke, 2012; Baxter & Hult, Forthcoming). It also raises questions around the performative nature of inspection: what type of evidence will these teacher/head teacher inspectors tend to privilege and how this will integrate with the type of knowledge they are expected to privilege as inspectors?

Ofsted documents insist inspectors must use their professional judgement and discretion when making their judgements, drawing upon a range of evidence in order to substantiate their claims (Ofsted, 2012f). But a key part of the inspector role is the degree to which they can enter into dialogue with the school in a way that supports school development while also legitimizing inspection judgements and credibility of evidence. This ‘teacher to teacher’ discussion taps into notions of professional dialogue, enabling inspectors to deploy their own school experiences in order to justify decisions. This can be a powerful means for the bridging of school and inspection discourses, as one head told us: «One of the team was a deputy head, from a grammar school just outside Birmingham and it was really interesting in terms of the conversations about people’s own experiences» (EP6). But interviews with inspector trainers offered different insights into the significance of such professional knowledge, identifying tensions in terms of one form of professional knowledge that is gained as a teacher or head teacher and the type of professional knowledge that is valued as part of an inspection team:

It’s the baggage that’s the problem, we ask them to leave their baggage behind, don’t bring it with you, it clutters, by that we mean what works in your school won’t necessarily work in the schools you are inspecting (EP10).

This was echoed by another inspector trainer who highlighted the ways in which the normative assumptions of head teachers often impede understanding of tasks that, although sharing the same name, may be put into practice in very different ways in different settings. This ex-head and inspector trainer describes how this plays out when teaching inspectors are called upon to observe lessons in their capacity as inspectors:

It's a different skill. We mustn't forget that teachers and head teachers and the way that they evaluate and observe teaching in schools, it has to be that way: it's developmental nurturing, it has to take into account that these are people that they know well, so they can't go in with total objectivity, and also they are immersed neck deep in that person's personal life. And I don't mean their domestic life but the fact that they weren't feeling very well last week, that they have an examination group and it may well demotivate them so there is an entire matrix of dynamics going on around headship and leaders and line managers that is a lot of galaxies away from an inspector walking into a classroom and judging teaching and leadership and behaviour. So yes, some people find it very difficult to get to the point of offering advice, equally people find it very difficult simply linking provision with outcome, or cause and effect (EP11).

The conflicting character of these accounts of what constitutes knowledge and evidence in inspection is compounded by the differing ways in which statistical data contribute to inspection judgements.

## THE DATA DILEMMA

Returning to House's description of evidence in evaluation; in order to create accounts that are both legitimate and persuasive, it is important that evidence *appears* to be both robust and credible. The inspectorate in England has historically used a mix of qualitative observations combined with statistical data as a basis upon which inspectors make their judgments. But successive drives to create a more transparent system of inspection, prompted initially by John Major's Citizens' Charter in 1991 (Parliament, 1991) and subsequently by the desire to compete internationally (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005; Grek, Lawn & Ozga, 2009), has led to the development of 'one of the most extensive educational data banks in the world' (Parliament, 2011).

The evidence on pupil attainment drawn from this school data management system (RAISE online)<sup>3</sup> is used by the inspectorate alongside other evi-

<sup>3</sup> Its website says that: «RAISEonline aims to: Enable schools to analyse performance data in greater depth as part of the self-evaluation process, Provide a common set of analyses for schools, Local authorities, inspectors and School Improvement Partners, and Better support teaching and learning» (Retrieved 08.11.2013 from <https://www.raiseonline.org/About.aspx>).

dence from, for example, school observations, surveys of parents and pupils and knowledge of school culture and context. But this study has revealed tensions around the use of data compared with the use of other forms of evidence that are combined with inspector professional knowledge in order to produce a judgment. The 2012 Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2012c, 2012f) and accompanying Inspection Handbook have caused a resurgence of a debate which dates back to pre-Ofsted days when Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) were accused of using their professional judgment to contribute to 'a secret garden' of education, in which the classroom was an occluded place where teachers operated free from parental and government intervention and where the inspectorate employed its professional judgment to obfuscate what was really occurring in schools. The current Chief Inspector has discussed these 'bad old days' of inspection:

We must be bold and decisive to build on the progress we've made as a nation. I remember how bad things were in the 1970s and 80s, when whole generations of young people were failed by a self-indulgent and unaccountable school system. Consider that before Ofsted, the school reports of Her Majesty's Inspectors weren't routinely available to the public. The three lines of text they sometimes contained were, until the early 1980s, confidential to head teachers and governors (Wilshaw, 2013).

The creation of Ofsted supposedly addressed transparency by introducing the publication of judgments supported by an extensive *Inspection Handbook* which articulated in minute detail, every aspect of the phases — before, during and after — of the inspection process (Maw, 1995; Ofsted, 1993a, 1993b).

A number of Parliamentary enquiries questioned the appropriateness of such a high degree of specification-known, in some quarters as a 'tick box' approach to inspection (Ofsted, 2004; Parliament, 2004, 2011). Questions were raised about the effectiveness of reporting on twenty eight different topics. The White Paper introduced by the incoming UK Coalition government in 2010 demanded a recentering on schooling and its inspection around 'the Importance of Teaching'. This direction was reflected in a 2012 Framework in which just four judgements replaced the previous twenty eight (Ofsted, 2009a, 2009b, 2012c, 2012f). The new Framework also featured a heightened emphasis on the professional judgement of its inspectors: analysis of the documents revealed a 40% increase in use of the word 'professional' in this Framework



as compared to the 2009 version. While a shorter, more simplified Framework was initially welcomed by both inspectors and head teachers, questions emerged about its implementation in practice. One Lead Inspector articulated some of the tensions:

The tension is that the actual judgement to make is about teaching over time, actually you spend a lot of time on learning methods and if there is one aspect of the current framework that teachers really are quite struggling with, teachers and inspectors, it's that inspectors are going into lessons observing teaching and making a judgement on what they see that teaching is good, but actually the judgement that comes out is satisfactory Cos they've got to get in the notion of teaching over time, and the impact of teaching over time, so that requires them to look at data, data so we have RAISEonline, but then you have the well why bother coming in just look at RAISE, but to use the Ofsted word, RAISE is a signpost: it is to signpost where we are going, but it is the only thing that the inspector has to show performance over time. So they do have that, progress and attainment, so they have to weigh that up with the data that the school provides and what they see, and that at the moment is the single biggest tension that inspectors are facing really (EP11).

An inspector trainer reflected on the difficulties that this is posing for inspector training:

No doubt about it, so even though we've gone from a framework that has, before Christmas, twenty eight judgements to four judgements, I'm getting feedback from our inspectors: this is no easier, in one way it's more challenging, but in truth it's focusing on what matters: the behaviour, the teaching and how well leadership and management are driving all of this, and generally, I think that the inspectors are happy about this, this aspect of the structure, the focus (EP12).

The increased emphasis on the professional judgement and knowledge of the inspectors (particularly the lead inspector) is combined with a government decision to discontinue the use of Contextual Value Added (CVA) data in the formation of inspection judgements. Up until 2012 three forms of data were used in the evaluation of English schools: raw and aggregated data about attainment; value added data, and contextual value added data.

The three forms of data are substantially different from one another and the shifting emphasis placed upon them reflects very different ways in which both school and individual pupil performance may be viewed. A diachronic analysis of the use of statistical data in inspection reflects changing political influences on schools since the creation of Ofsted in 1992 (Baxter, 2013b). The Contextual Value Added measure was introduced into the secondary Achievement and Attainment tables in 2006 in order to attempt to: «give a better and fairer measure of school effectiveness than raw results alone» (Ray, 2006). Where value added data introduced in 2002 gives a picture of how far pupils travel depending upon their starting point, CVA took the data one step further taking pupil deprivation indicators into account in relation to pupil attainment. This measure was particularly popular with schools in areas of high socio-economic deprivation as it prevented direct comparisons with schools in more economically buoyant areas. Although schools were able to see their CVA measures for all key stages in the Pupil Achievement Tracker database (PAT), the inclusion of this measure in RAISEonline meant that Ofsted inspectors would automatically take this contextual element into account when forming judgements. Following a CVA pilot in 2005 the measure was mainstreamed and remained part of all inspection frameworks until January 2012, when it was removed (Ofsted, 2012a, 2012b, 2012f). Although some implications of context were reflected in the introduction in 2011 of The Pupil Premium (a payment to schools intended to support the development of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils, indexed by the receipt of free school meals) (DFE, 2012) this is not considered as part of the inspection data. Debates continue about the impact of socio-economic disadvantage between those who see socio-economic inequalities shaping both individual and school performance and those who (like the current Chief Inspector) see such discussions as excusing under-performance and contributing to a culture of ‘low expectations’ that disadvantages pupils from poor areas (see for example the Chief Inspector’s 2013 Report on Schools, Ofsted 2013).

The withdrawal of the CVA measure in 2012 was due to a number of factors, including the growing significance of international comparisons such as the OECD PISA (for further discussion see Grek, 2008; Grek et al., 2009) which take raw, not CVA, data as a basis for comparison. The 2010 Coalition government’s education policy, articulated through the 2010 White Paper and subsequent 2011 Education (Schools) Act (DFE, 2010; Parliament, 2011), placed great stress upon the need for England to succeed in international competition in education. In addition, the arrival of a new Chief Inspector in 2012 marked



the beginning of a new phase for the agency. The new HMCI, a former head teacher of a school judged by the inspectorate to be outstanding, yet functioning within an extremely deprived area (40% on the Free School Meals Indicator of social deprivation), has publicly proclaimed the view that schools in the past have used CVA as an excuse to set lower targets for students from deprived backgrounds, whilst also using indices of social deprivation as an 'excuse' for a lack of improvement. This was compounded by figures released by Ofsted which revealed that, since the inception of the new framework in January 2012, out of 348 schools inspected only 19% of schools improved, 50% stayed the same and over a quarter [28%] declined on their previous inspection performance. This compares with 34% improving, 47% staying the same and 19% declining at inspection under the previous regime in the period 2010/2011 (see Baxter & Clarke, 2012a; Ofsted, 2012d).

This change in the type of data deemed appropriate has created a dilemma for both schools and inspectors. While RAISEonline data give an indication of pupil progress they do not tell the whole story in terms of either context or changes that have been made within the school, as reflected by this statement by the head teacher in a school with 24% of students in receipt of free school meals and 11.4% of pupils on the School Action Plus programme:<sup>4</sup>

It's the rigidity of the system, given that this is a relatively deprived school. Now we have a very clear indicator that of nineteen thousand schools on a database of Pupil Premium, our score is 46% of free school meals; which is high. So we are in the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile for deprivation and obviously struggling to get high results (EP24).

The concerns expressed in this case were reflected by a number of other heads in the study, all from schools in areas of high deprivation who indicated that they felt that this lack of consideration of school context (as reflected in the inspection judgement), was a fundamental weakness in the inspection process. Although Ofsted stress the importance of carrying out in-school observations and inspections, reflections from a number of school leaders indicated that, although they valued on-site inspections, in many cases they felt that

4 A plan relating to students with special needs in England: *Students at School Action Plus* require more detailed planning in terms of educational needs and will also be required to receive input from special advisory services, see: <http://www.specialeducationalneeds.co.uk/UsefulInformation/SEN-EducationInfo/SchoolAction.html>.

judgements had already been made on the basis of the performance data and that the knowledge deployed within the inspection was strongly focused on statistical data. One head teacher suggested that sometimes inspectors arrived at the school with a draft report already prepared: «they had the words there on their laptop which they just tweaked at the end of the visit» (HT1). Given the very heavy emphasis on teacher observation and feedback within the new framework, it is perhaps surprising that school leaders believe that very little of this is taken into account when making the judgement. But the new inspection period is much shorter; teams are much smaller than in the past and inspectors may now be called to observe anything up to fifty lessons in just two days. As one head told us:

Let's be honest, you come and do a two day inspection. Do you really get a grip; a feel for what school's about in just two days? You go in and see around 50 observations, say my best staff work Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday and they [the inspectors] come Thursday, Friday? It's the inconsistency. I think they should flip that coin, have their first conversations with the SIP [School Inspection partner] the LEA [Local Education Authority]: tell me about the leadership and management of the school, where do you see the grades over the next 3 years under this management? Then go and inspect it. Otherwise stay in London and look at RAISEonline (EP20).

But the education function in the Local Authorities (LAs) is in many cases declining: indeed, in one of our case studies the number of local authority staff working with schools had declined from forty to two in a two year period. This decline, partly due to reduced funding and partly due to political choices to encourage greater numbers of financially independent schools under the academies programme (Easton, 2009; Machin & Vernoit, 2011), means that in many cases the support and knowledge of both inspection and school improvement possessed by LA school advisors is now lost (Douette, 1993). An increasing number of schools now buy in services and pedagogical advice, and contract inspectors can also earn money acting as self-employed consultants paid directly by schools. As a result, their impartiality, value and knowledge within the inspection process is potentially compromised (Humphrey, 1989). The demise of the LA education function through cuts and recent damning reports by Ofsted which highlight the links between underperforming LAs and underperforming schools (Elliot, 2005; Paton, 2013), combine to create



a situation in which, now more than ever, the hegemonic quality of Ofsted discourses of success and failure, and the ways in which the agency privileges particular forms of knowledge, evidence and authority look likely to become more powerful, despite their vulnerabilities and contestations.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we set out to discuss the shifting nature of knowledge and evidence within the system of inspection of schools in England and the way in which this impacts upon discourses of inspection. As House suggests: «The question of how the public interest and the interests of all parties are to be represented in an evaluation is critical» (House, 1980, p. 175). What is particularly critical in terms of the public interest within school inspection is how it is conceived of, and by whom. Twenty years have elapsed since the creation of Ofsted in its guise of ‘the parents’ friend’, yet an important question for and about the inspectorate is whether or not the public interest is at the heart of the inspectorate or, whether Ofsted now represents other interests: those of government, but also those of the agency itself, which, unless it can retain credibility, may risk decline or extinction in an era of ‘shrinking government’.

The discussion demonstrated that the power and authority invested in the inspectorate is reliant on not only the act of inspection but also on the discourses surrounding it; on its credibility as an actor (or body of actors) and the extent to which in performing inspection it *appears* to act in the public interest. It is in these discourses, in which certain forms of knowledge and evidence are privileged, that the power of inspection lies. Changes to the inspection frameworks, underpinned by changes as to what constitutes valid knowledge and evidence at a particular time, should not be read as logical progressions towards improvement. Rather, they are better understood as successive attempts by both agency and government to retain control of an increasingly systemless system of schooling (Lawn, 2013) in which the autonomy granted to individual and federated schools present substantial challenges for how they can be governed.

The shifting emphasis placed on context-related knowledge evidence is a theme throughout this discussion, in terms of the type and nature of evidence deemed valid at any one time (for example the CVA measure), and the type of knowledge which is ignored or overlooked in order to attain a particular

objective. In the case of the teacher/head teacher inspectors, pedagogical and school knowledge is privileged not so much in terms of what it contributes to the judgement process but rather in terms of its ability to bridge discourses, and to produce credibility and legitimacy for the inspectorate.

Those forms of knowledge that are excluded from Ofsted judgements are perhaps those that reveal most about the current system. The exclusion of socio-economic impact on school performance (e.g., via CVA) risks imposing a culture of failure on schools that are struggling to improve. In its haste to use members of the teaching profession to create the credibility necessary to effect this particular form of evaluation, Ofsted fails to consider a wealth of research on the strength of that teacher professional identity and how this impacts upon judgement (Goodson, 1981; Goodson & Goodson, 1992; Maclure, 1992). The inspectorate is perhaps unwittingly making room for discourses of inspection which, rather than leading to a discursive symmetry and overall homogeneity of discourse and practice, may instead lead to fragmentation and the concomitant erosion of the credibility of the evaluative process (referred to by many of our respondents as the problem of ‘inconsistencies’). Will such gaps in theory and practice undermine the capacity of inspection to provide hegemonic representations of what good education in England looks like?

## REFERENCES

- BAXTER, J. (2013a). *Governing By inspection: Research Report — English Case study*. Milton Keynes, UK: The Open University.
- BAXTER, J. (2013b). Professional inspector or inspecting professional? Teachers as inspectors in a new regulatory regime for education in England. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43(4), 467-485.
- BAXTER, J., & CLARKE, J. (2012). What counts as success in inspection in England — shifting criteria? Paper presented at the *European Conference for Educational Research*. Network 23 Symposium ‘Governing by inspection’: national developments. Cadiz, Spain.
- BAXTER, J., & CLARKE, J. (2013). Farewell to the Tickbox Inspector? Ofsted and the changing regime of school inspection in England. *Oxford Review of Education*, 39(5), 702-718.
- BAXTER, J., & HULT, A. (Forthcoming). *School inspectors in Sweden and England: the impact of changing policy on practices*.



- BEERE, J. (2011). *The Perfect Ofsted Inspection*. London: Crown House.
- BEERE, J. (2012). *The Perfect Ofsted Lesson*. Carmarthen, Wales: Independent Thinking Press.
- BURNS, J. (2011). Coasting' Schools told to improve within six years. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-16002484>.
- BURTON, F., & CARLEN, P. (1979). Official discourse: On discourse analysis. *Government Publications, Ideology and State*, 2(1), 441-450.
- CHILTON, P. (2003). *Analysing political discourse: Theory and practice*. London: Routledge.
- CLARKE, J. (2008). Performance Paradoxes. *The Politics of Evaluation in the Public Services*. In H. Davis & S. Martin (Eds.), *Public Services Inspection in the UK. Research Highlights in Social Work* (50) (pp. 120-134). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- CLARKE, J. (2012). The Work of Governing. In K. Coulter & W. R. Schumann (Eds.), *Governing Cultures: Anthropological Perspectives on Political Labour, Power, and Government* (pp. 209-232). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- D'ANDREA, V. M., & GOSLING, D. (2005). *Improving teaching and learning: A whole institution approach*. Buckingham: McGraw-Hill.
- DFE. (2010). *The Importance of Teaching: Schools White Paper*. Retrieved November 11 2011, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-importance-of-teaching-the-schools-white-paper-2010>.
- DFE. (2012). *Understanding the pupil premium*. London: The Department for Education.
- DOUETTE, M. (1993). *Technology Ways and Means*. London: Routledge.
- EASTON, G. (2009). Failing Schools to be Academies: Gove Speech to the Tory Party Conference BBC. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/8294444.stm>.
- ELLIOT, J. (2005). *Using Narrative in Social Research*. London Sage.
- FAIRCLOUGH, N. (2001). *Language and power*. Boston: Addison-Wesley Longman Ltd.
- FAIRCLOUGH, N. (2009). A dialectical-relational approach to critical discourse analysis in social research. *Methods of critical discourse analysis*, 2, 162-186.
- FITZGERALD, R., & HOUSLEY, W. (Eds.) (2009). *Media, Policy and Interaction*. Farnham: Ashgate
- FOUCAULT, M. (1969). *Archaeology of knowledge*. New York: Routledge.
- GARNER, R. (2012) 'Satisfactory Schools no longer good enough'. *The Independent*. Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/satisfactory-schools-no-longer-good-enough-8101477.html>.
- GOODSON, I. (1981). Life Histories and the study of schooling. *Interchange*, 11(4), 62-75.

- GOODSON, I., & GOODSON, I. F. (1992). *Studying teachers' lives*. Bristol, PA: Taylor & Francis.
- GREK, S. (2008). *PISA in the British Media: leaning tower or robust testing tool?* CES Briefing 45. Edinburgh: Centre for Educational Sociology / University of Edinburgh.
- GREK, S., LAWN, M., & OZGA, J. (2009). *Production of OECD's 'Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)*. Edinburgh: Centre for Educational Sociology / University of Edinburgh.
- GREK, S., LAWN, M., OZGA, J., & SEGERHOLM, C. (2013). Governing by inspection: European Inspectorates and the creation of a European Education Policy Space. *Comparative Education*, 49(4), November, 486-502.
- HOUSE, E. R. (1980). *Evaluating with Validity*. London: Sage.
- HOWARD, L. (2012). *10 things that will affect the value of your home*. Retrieved February 25 2013, from <http://www.moneywise.co.uk/home-mortgage/improvements/10-things-will-affect-the-value-your-home>.
- HUMPHREY, E. F. (1989). *Searching for Life's Meaning: A Phenomenological and Heuristic Exploration of the Experience of Searching the Meaning in Life*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Union Institute.
- LAWN, M. (2013). A Systemless System: designing the disarticulation of English state education. *European Educational Research Journal*, 12(2), 231-241.
- MACHIN, S., & VERNON, J. (2011). *Changing School Autonomy: Academy Schools and their Introduction to England's Education*. CEE Discussion Papers. London: Centre for the Economics of Education.
- MACLURE, M. (1992). Arguing for yourself: Identity as an organising principle in teacher's jobs and lives. *British Educational Research Journal*, 19(4), 311-322.
- MACLURE, S. (2000). *The Inspectors' Calling*. Oxford: Hodder and Stoughton.
- MAW, J. (1995). The Handbook for the Inspection of Schools: a critique. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 25(1), 75-87.
- OFSTED. (1993a). *Framework for the Inspection of Schools*. London: Ofsted.
- OFSTED. (1993b). *Corporate Plan 1993-94 to 1095-6 — Improvement through inspection*. London: Ofsted.
- OFSTED. (1999). *Lessons Learned from Special Measures*. London: Ofsted.
- OFSTED. (2003). *Leadership and Management: What inspection tells us*. London: Ofsted.
- OFSTED. (2004). *The Future of school inspection: new inspections and the viewpoint of users*. London: Ofsted.
- OFSTED. (2005). *The Common Inspection Framework for Inspecting Education and Training*. London: Ofsted.



- OFSTED. (2009a). *Conducting School Inspections — Guidance for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005, from September 2009*. London: Ofsted.
- OFSTED. (2009b). *The framework for school inspection in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005, from September 2009*. London: Ofsted.
- OFSTED. (2012a). *The evaluation schedule for the inspection of maintained schools and academies*. London: Ofsted.
- OFSTED. (2012b). *The Framework for School inspection 2012*. London: Ofsted.
- OFSTED. (Producer) (2012c). *The framework for school inspection: purposes*. Retrieved from [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/framework-for-school-inspection-september-2012-o](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/framework-for-school-inspection-september-2012-o).
- OFSTED. (2012d). *Official Statistics Release: maintained schools inspections and outcomes*. London: Ofsted.
- OFSTED. (Producer) (2012f). *School inspection handbook from September 2012*. Retrieved from <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/school-inspection-handbook-september-2012>.
- OFSTED. (2013). *Annual Report 2012-13*. London: Ofsted. Retrieved from <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/annualreport1213>.
- OZGA, J. (2011). *Governing Education by Numbers: Preformativity, Data and the Spectacle of Comparison*. Paper presented at the *Performance Definitions and Measurements in Public Services*. Maison Francaise, Oxford.
- PARLIAMENT. (1991). *From citizen's Charter to Public Service Guarantees: Entitlements to Public Services*. London: HMSO. Retrieved from [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmpubadm/411/41105.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmpubadm/411/41105.htm).
- PARLIAMENT. (1992). *Education (Schools) Act*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office.
- PARLIAMENT. (2004). *The Work of Ofsted, Sixth Report of Session 2003-4, Report, Together with Formal Minutes, Oral and Written Evidence 2003-4: House of Commons Papers 2003, 04,426*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office.
- PARLIAMENT. (2011). *Education Act 2011*. Retrieved January 2 2012, from <http://web.archive.org/web/20070721022125/http://ofstednews.ofsted.gov.uk/article/78>.
- PATON, G. (2012). *Ofsted: one million children stuck in coasting schools*. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved February 1 2013, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/9020744/Ofsted-one-million-children-stuck-in-coasting-schools.html>.

- PATON, G. (2013). Ofsted: failing education authorities should be sacked. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/education-news/9809061/Ofsted-failing-education-authorities-should-be-sacked.html>.
- RAY, A. (2006). *School Value Added Measures in England*. London: DFES.
- STAKE, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. New York: Guilford Press.
- WILSHAW, M. (2013). Festival of Education Speech, 21/06/13. Retrieved September 5 2013, from <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/festival-of-education-2013-hmci-speech>.

\*

Received: January 9, 2014

Final version received: March 10, 2014

Published online: May 12, 2014

