

School Leadership

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today



Hooray
its a new Ofsted
framework!

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Hooray:

A new Ofsted framework!



Chris Watkins believes that the new Ofsted framework is so poor it will eventually undermine the whole Ofsted Project. It is therefore, a big step forward in his view

Now and again an apparently small act brings new realisations and understandings that are well beyond its scale. Like when an unelected coalition takes it upon itself to redefine the criteria by which a country judges its schools. It serves to show what a nakedly political instrument Ofsted has now become.

I have been an educator long enough to remember the proposals for the inspection system which would replace Her Majesty's Inspectorate. Ken Clarke as Education Secretary said, "I'm making it free of control from me, from my Department, from the Government of the Day"^a. That was

before the massive centralisation of education happened, where from the Secretary of State having three powers when I was first a teacher, they now have 2,000 (and 50 more in the most recent Act). As long ago as the 1930s it was predicted that when it became apparent that national governments have no impact on international economics, they would turn to the domestic sphere in order to create their claims for potency.

So what is behind a change in the framework? Some new research? A new slant on school improvement? A new political view of schooling (which was not stated in the

election)? A new twist to the accountability story? As the recently-coined terminology of ‘dawn raids’ for no-notice school inspections makes clear, the culture of the watchdog is what it’s about, and a mechanism by which low trust governments attempt to make some sort of difference – through surveillance. Note that the term ‘low trust’ is applied to the government, not the culture they relate to. Poll evidence for the last 25 years shows that of the professions the public trusts, doctors and teachers remain at the top of the scale, whereas politicians and journalists remain at the bottom^b.

This is all part of the culture of fear and compliance, which now pervades schooling in a new way, and it’s a major distortion of education. It was an adviser to the Bank of England, in Margaret Thatcher’s time as prime minister, who specified that if a measure is used as a target it ceases to be a good measure^c. Since then our education system has become distorted in many ways by using performance measures as targets, and even OECD now say that England’s exam performance data is unbelievable^d.

The consequence of setting performance goals

In commerce and industry it’s known that setting performance goals is only effective if people already have the skills to achieve them^e. So performance goals might act as a motivator in a predictable context such as a production line. But what about a learning context? And what does it do to teachers? They respond by becoming more controlling – and performance gets worse^f. Considering the wider context of the UK, “educational performance remains static, uneven and strongly related to parents’ income and background”^g.

Crucially, in England, “between-school variance is comparatively low and within school variation is comparatively high”^h. That for me points to the culture of the classroom and some school practices. It illuminates the connection between compliance cultures and divisive cultures. In compliant times, schools with more working class students have a classroom culture more focussed on behaviour and compliance than learningⁱ: this does not help them achieve their best, but this finding does illuminate the current divisiveness. In summary, I suggest if you operate a schooling system as a performance system, it will function as a traditional selection system.

So how does Ofsted fit in this picture? While senior HMI may continue to argue that it’s the school’s responsibility to decide how they want to run classrooms and Ofsted’s job is only to check they’re getting the results, the political culture of compliance created by politicians (and the folk-lore surrounding inspection) ensures that it becomes an inauthentic tick box culture instead of professional

evaluation. Handling inspection through ‘frameworks’ and the pseudo-objectivity of numerical gradings reinforces this. Yet 98 per cent of overall inspection outcomes are the same as school performance data^j.

Question: What is the connection between these: Organisational Fear, Setting Targets, Educational Divisiveness? (Clue: could there be something in the acronym?)

Surely there is a better way to improve performance?

Effective schools are not compliant places, and this is interesting in relation to the recent increase in government talk about ‘coasting schools’. One study of 78 schools asked, ‘Do you ever have to do things that are against the rules in order to do what’s best for your students?’. In ‘Moving’ schools 79 per cent answered ‘Yes’, in ‘Stuck’ schools 75 per cent answered ‘No’^k.

Schools who are prepared to act according to their professional knowledge (developing it further at the same time), and not be driven by the climate of fear can illuminate the way. From my engagement with schools that are prepared to go beyond the compliance game, I observed the following journey taken towards becoming learning-centred:

- Teacher-centred classrooms create a culture that tests the motivation of predictable groups of learners to the limit, and a pattern of performance in which the long-standing patterns of school achievement remain.
- Learner-centred classrooms create a more engaging culture for a wider range of learners, but may not generate a widely shared wish to achieve.
- Learning-centred classrooms create an engaging culture and an identity as learners for all participants (teachers too!). Enhanced thinking, challenge and agency can lead to pupils making double the progress in measured performance.

Their journey is helped by such things as a head teacher who says, “We answer to a higher authority than Ofsted”. These are clearly a minority of schools in current times. They are adventurous schools^l.

What difference will a new framework make?

There will be an immediate increase in the energy given by many schools to make sure they don’t get caught out by not looking good. There will be a lot of short courses on the new Ofsted framework – unlike the ones on effective learning. ‘Self-evaluation templates’ for the new framework have

already appeared on the Internet – with 170 boxes to tick!

Within the new framework, there’s nothing surprising about the shifts of emphasis and the differences these will make. They align with the other elements of this rushed policy by this Secretary of State:

- An emphasis on teaching, rather than learning
- An emphasis on subjects, rather than skills
- An emphasis on raw scores, rather than value added
- A downgrading of emphasis on pupil voice

These are deeply predictable elements of a Conservative policy on education – and they will contribute to a culture in which the same social groups as always achieve the benefits that follow from schooling.

The way the framework is implemented by jobbing inspectors from your local warship-building company is likely to contradict the findings of Ofsted’s own reports:

- 2002 Curriculum in successful primary schools
- 2006 Improving behaviour
- 2010 Learning: creative approaches that raise standards

There may well be further steps in a cycle I call ‘reciprocal reactivity’. This is witnessed in the field of behaviour:

- Ofsted focuses on behaviour
- Some schools hide disruptive pupils from inspectors
- Ofsted announces ‘dawn raids’
- Some schools build lookout towers
- Ofsted provides helicopters for inspectors
- Some schools purchase navigation blockers

This is classic stuff in ‘dealing with behaviour’ but a far cry from the principles of reciprocal responsibility^m, which should inform an inspection system.

Is there any hope?

Hope is the counterpoint to fear. Each of these four-letter words is an acronym ‘Helping Other Possibilities Emerge’ versus ‘Forget Everything And Run’. At the local level, schools still have the power to be places of hope, despite the stories of negative consequence that are thrown at them. In the process they help themselves to be places that build resilience, especially important for difficult times. They know they are involved in education for community rather than education for consumerism.

To be effective at the local level demands an increasing degree of keeping national dynamics at bay. Leaders have to self-immunise against intimidation. In the case of Ofsted, I see little hope of it and its three large contractors changing quickly, so we have to downplay its value and talk more about its weakness. Just like SATs, its measures are unreliable and inauthentic. More and more people recognise the difference in outcome of an inspection led by a HMI and an inspection led by a jobbing contractor, and that’s alongside the variation created by the regular moving of goal posts! Sometimes a critique becomes public, as in the evidence to a number of House of Commons Education Committee’s enquiries. Recently passing through the town where I attended secondary school, I was interested to see the local newspaper headline ‘Watchdog under Fire’. The article quoted local head teachers and parents questioning the credibility, validity and reliability of Ofsted inspections.

The political use of Ofsted will remain. Now that we have





schools. This is only an informal practice and could be stopped at any time.

So why the 'hooray' in the title of this article? Well, the new framework may contribute to an increased questioning of the credibility of Ofsted. With the impending staff crisis in our schools, this is one necessary element in the reclamation of its human heart and the ethic of public service. So let's hope we don't get fooled again.

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a Chief Inspector from a privatised school, I am not taking any bets on the continuation of the current practice whereby Ofsted inspects academies in the way it does maintained

Knowledge trails

- School Leadership Today – The new Ofsted framework uncovered <http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/thenewofstedframeworkuncovered.htm>
- Every Child Journal – Working with the new framework [NEW ECJ](#)

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