

How has teaching been judged by Ofsted inspectors since the first inspections in 1993?

Dr Helena McVeigh

This PhD thesis was inspired by my extensive experience of inspecting and supporting schools in England and overseas, including as one of Her Majesty's Inspectors between 1991 to 2000. The research's main aims were to review the development of Ofsted's criteria by which inspectors judge the quality of teaching in schools and to gain some primary headteachers' and teachers' views on the criteria and how they are used in their schools. The thesis includes an analysis of the development of the criteria since the first Ofsted inspections in 1993, and considers possible influences of government policies and educational research. I interviewed three former and one current HMI to explore their perspectives about the development of the criteria, and ten primary headteachers and pairs of teachers from their schools to hear their views.

This research has highlighted how responsive Ofsted has been, since its inception, to external criticism and government policies; the number of different frameworks and handbooks are testimony to that. The teaching criteria have not been affected as much as the structure of the inspection framework. The main components of what inspectors should look for when evaluating the quality of teaching are the same as in the earliest frameworks, which were based on HMIs' 'collective wisdom' (as described by Lee and Fitz, 1997). There has been a clear shift from teaching as a performance and 'the lesson' to looking at the bigger picture of teaching over time and the impact on pupils' progress and attainment; these changes were welcomed by the headteachers and teachers I interviewed.

Teaching has always been an important part of an Ofsted inspection. Ofsted has not attempted to justify its teaching criteria, though linked them to the Teachers' Standards in 2012. There is, however, synergy between Ofsted's teaching criteria and findings from academic research into what makes teaching effective (for example, Coe et al, 2015). Although the main features of the teaching criteria have remained constant, albeit with additions such as a focus on different groups of pupils, in each of the 12 or so iterations of the inspection guidance, the language of the teaching criteria has changed, sometimes seemingly for its own sake. The inclusion of descriptors for each of the teaching grades, introduced in 2005, has, I believe, not helped, as the language of the criteria and difference between grades are open to interpretation and very subjective. As schools struggled to gain the all-important 'good' Ofsted outcome, an industry developed offering publications and training in the 'perfect Ofsted lesson'.

School leaders have attempted to anticipate Ofsted's expectations and increased the intensity of their own monitoring activities, particularly in schools that are in special measures or that require improvement. Every new missive from Ofsted results in a flurry of activity in schools to try to match what school leaders perceive as the 'Ofsted expectation'. Inaccurate advice and anecdotes have been circulated amongst schools about what inspectors expect to see, resulting in Ofsted issuing a list of 'Ofsted myths' and circulating instructions to inspectors to avoid, for example, any suggestion that Ofsted has a preferred way of teaching.

The quality of teaching assumed greater significance from 2012 when it became one of only four inspection judgements. Schools can now only be judged 'outstanding' overall if teaching is judged outstanding and such schools are exempt from being inspected (DfE, 2011). In addition, the term 'requires improvement' was introduced to replace 'satisfactory', from September 2012; a change that my teacher interviewees disliked, as one said: 'To know that you're not even satisfactory is even worse. It's quite a big drop, quite a big gap I think between good and requires improvement'.

The amount of criticism targeted at Ofsted increased from 2012 and become more strident in tone, calling Ofsted 'a disgrace' (Garner, 2015) and the ATL union giving HMCI a vote of no confidence (Garner, 2013). The current HMCI, Sir Michael Wilshaw, has responded rapidly to teachers' and unions' concerns about inconsistency, the suggestion that Ofsted has a preferred teaching approach and over-reliance by some inspectors on performance data. He has removed the grade for teaching in a lesson, banned certain phrases about teaching in inspection reports and said publicly that some inspectors rely too much on data. However, Ofsted's responsiveness, although welcomed by teachers

in some respects, has created its own problems, as schools and inspectors try to come to terms with yet another set of rules to keep themselves on 'top of the game' (Ball, 2003). The changes do much to appease headteachers and unions, but arguably reflect mistrust and increasing scrutiny of additional inspectors. Ofsted has brought inspections in-house, reduced ('culled' as it was referred to by the media) the number of non-HMI inspectors and significantly increased the number of practising headteachers and deputies who inspect. Time will tell whether these changes appease the critics, although the public criticism does appear to have subsided since September 2015.

The government has increased the significance of the Ofsted inspection outcome for schools by, for example, linking it to consequences such as forced academisation. The thesis suggests that there seems to be a 'misrecognition' (Swartz, 1997), by those in positions of power and authority in Ofsted of how important the inspection is for a school. This was reflected by HMI interviewee comments such as: 'If teaching is going well and children are being taught properly, then there's nothing to fear from Ofsted really, or an Ofsted inspection'. The misrecognition culminated in Sir Michael Wilshaw suggesting that schools should not prepare for an inspection by having a mock-inspection (Wilshaw, 2014).

It is only since I have worked very closely in a supportive role with schools, for example, as a London Challenge adviser, that I have come to appreciate the lengths schools will go to get a good Ofsted outcome. I am sure that when I was an HMI, I was equally guilty of 'misrecognition'.

I firmly believe that Ofsted has contributed to improvement in the quality of teaching in English primary schools; this view was supported by the majority of interviewees. However, I think that the time is right for a change in approach, in response to schools' increasing understanding and desire to take ownership of the rules of the 'Ofsted game'. Ofsted has become too high stakes in this country and this is reflected in the following comments from two interviewees:

'I think that too many schools live in fear actually [of Ofsted]. In fear, or in preparation.'
[headteacher]

'It's all about Ofsted isn't it? What will Ofsted want? And everything revolves around that'.
[teacher]

As a result of this research, my own inspection philosophy has not changed. I continue to believe in 'doing good as you go' and in 'leaving a school in a better place than you found it': principles instilled in me during my years as an HMI. I continue to inspect without 'fear or favour' and to never stop appreciating that the opportunity to inspect schools is a real privilege. I am, however, more conscious of the impact of inspections on the recipients, particularly teachers. My inspection practice has had to change because of the numerous amendments to the inspection framework and handbooks in the past six years and, since September 2015, to the management of inspections directly by Ofsted. These changes have resulted very often in more to do within the available time.

I am grateful that we no longer have to grade lessons or even teaching when we feedback after an observation; changes that were introduced in 2014. The recent government's white paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE, 2016: 22) includes a proposition that Ofsted should no longer award an overall grade for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment 'to help clarify that the focus of inspection is on outcomes and to reduce burdens on schools and teachers'. This will be a radical change, with a likely return to the focus on the school's performance data, and raises questions about the purpose of visiting a school at all to inspect it.

Finally, the teachers' and headteachers' passion for doing the best for their pupils, often in difficult circumstances, will be a lasting memory from my interviews for this research. Despite the workload and challenges, as one teacher I interviewed said:

'We're happy being teachers still. It's not obviously affected us that much. We understand we have to have criteria, otherwise how are you all going to be consistent and achieve and obviously at the end of the day it's all about the children and how much they can attain and great that you want them to achieve rapid progress. It's just sometimes not realistic.'