



REVIEW OF *ON HER MAJESTY'S SCHOOL INSPECTION SERVICE*

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Summary of Review

This descriptive work urges U.S. policymakers to consider the English system of school inspections as a way of expanding our understanding of student achievement. Such an innovation is timely, according to the report, because the No Child Left Behind legislation is coming up for reauthorization. Using data largely from the English Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the report outlines the English system, including the rubrics it uses in judging teaching, some characteristics of its inspectors, and how much such a system might cost states in the United States. Readers should keep in mind that the report is an advocacy piece and not a research document. No research questions are posed, and few examples from the extensive literature on English school inspections are offered. Thus, the report does not include key research findings, be they supportive or critical, of the process or of the very concept of the inspection service. In order to make sound judgments, policymakers need clear information about alternative approaches, hence the possible attraction of publications such as the one reviewed here. Unfortunately, the potential for *On Her Majesty's School Inspection Service* to provide such help is limited by its design as an advocacy piece.

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REVIEW OF *ON HER MAJESTY'S SCHOOL INSPECTION SERVICE*

Steven Jay Gross, Temple University

I. Introduction

On Her Majesty's School Inspection Service, by Craig D. Jerald and published by Education Sector Reports,¹ is a descriptive work that urges U.S. policymakers to consider the English system of school inspections as a way of expanding our understanding of school achievement. Such an innovation is timely, according to the report, because the No Child Left Behind legislation is coming up for reauthorization. Using data largely derived from the English Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted),² the report outlines how the English system works, what rubrics it uses in judging teaching, some characteristics of those who do the inspecting, and how much such a system might cost states in the U.S.

This is not a work of research and readers should keep that in mind. No research questions are posed and few examples from the extensive literature on English school inspections are offered, thereby excluding scholarship that is critical of the inspection process or of the concept of the inspection service itself. The report does contain interesting data, such as inspection results from the 2009-2010 school year. But these data are not analyzed. This is also the case with other data in the report. Because there is no research question, no formal method, little reference to the literature, and little analysis of data, readers are dealing with a testimonial.

In order to make sound judgments, clear information is needed about alternative approaches, hence the possible attraction of publications such as the one reviewed here. Unfortunately, due to its design as a partisan proposal, the potential for *On Her Majesty's School Inspection Service* to provide such help is limited at best.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report argues for U.S. policymakers to consider adopting an inspection system like the one used in England as a way of expanding our understanding of school quality beyond that offered by standardized tests. Specifically, the report lists three “policy challenges” that states will face, which the English inspection system has already dealt with. These include the ability to:

1. Judge schools on a broader range of evidence without losing sight of the fundamental importance of student achievement, including standardized test scores.
2. Leverage expert judgment rather than relying solely on spreadsheet formulas, yet still ensure sufficient safeguards against inconsistent or inflated ratings.
3. Achieve a better balance between rigorous evaluative ratings and better diagnostic feedback to help schools improve (p. 2).

The report distinguishes between English inspection systems and accreditation and similar outside visitations currently used in the U.S. Further, the report provides examples of the nature and structure of the English inspection system, including selected rubrics, and cost estimates for its adoption in the U.S.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

There is little formal rationale offered in support of the findings in this report, since it is more a descriptive and advocacy work than it is a product of traditional research. The report's premise is that the English Inspection system is a good one and that the United States should adopt it. It builds the case for the English inspection model by detailing some of its current qualities and suggesting its potential to create a richer picture of schools.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report makes few references to the literature on the English school inspection system besides data supplied by Ofsted itself. Consequently, it excludes important findings, exemplified below, that raise concerns about the process and approaches of the English system.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report's methods are descriptive and more journalistic than qualitative or quantitative in nature. No guiding research questions are posed. The example of a real school's experience with the inspection system is offered to illustrate the process (the Peterhouse Primary School). However, there is neither sufficient depth nor sufficient detail to call this a case study. No case is made that this example is typical of schools undergoing inspection.

The report does provide useful data showing combined results for primary and secondary schools inspected in the 2009-2010 academic year, a breakdown of primary school effectiveness by each of the 27 dimensions that Ofsted currently uses, and rubrics describing student achievement, quality teaching, and failing ("inadequate") schools. However, no longitudinal data are provided to give the reader context, nor does this listing

provide sufficient evaluative information which would support or deny the utility of this system.

Also included are two projections, by state, of estimated costs for adopting an inspection system on the English model. These represent a lower and an upper bound estimate of possible costs calculated from different ways of transposing Ofsted budgets onto U.S. conditions. The report also includes a projection of the number of inspectors that would be needed by each state. While the methods used to derive these costs seem reasonable, they do not include start-up costs.

VI. Review of the Validity of Findings and Conclusions

Because the report is primarily an advocacy document, its findings and conclusions are more illustrative than based on evidence. However, its premise that American policymakers should consider the English example as they look beyond the current NCLB regulations is provocative and deserving of attention. Below, I raise three key questions for U.S. policymakers and practitioners:

- **How effectively does this report build the case for using the English inspection system?**
- **How effectively does the report alert readers to important challenges to the English school inspection system?**
- **How effectively does this report illuminate the evaluation of quality teaching in the English inspection system?**

How effectively does this report build the case for using the English inspection system?

The report proposes state-based inspection systems to augment NCLB's reliance on standardized tests to determine school success or failure. In the words of the report:

Some states might decide to stick with accountability formulas rather than trying inspections, perhaps adding a few statistical indicators beyond test scores. But the English example suggests that inspections offer a way to make much more nuanced judgments about school performance, provide richer information to parents and the public, offer better formative feedback to schools, inform much more targeted improvement and interventions for low-performing schools, and accelerate timelines for school improvement (p. 4).

The report's central argument is that an inspection service would augment high-stakes test results with on-site observations, thereby providing needed perspective. This may be the case, but evidence in the report states: "In 93 percent of inspections conducted during 2009-10, the judgment of the school's overall effectiveness matched the judgment for student achievement" (p. 9). The reader is left wondering what difference these inspections

made over the results of standardized tests alone and how the huge variety of community contexts and socio-economic circumstances interacted with test scores and the results of these evaluations.

Other questions about the applicability of the English inspection system are equally puzzling and unanswered. Even if readers are attracted to the idea of a school-inspection system, little in this report compares and contrasts the English system with other

Policymakers and practitioners should rest any decision to follow the English example on solid evidence that it is the best possible model. Such evidence is not provided.

inspection systems currently used around the world. Yet there are many other inspection systems that the author could have considered. For instance, a 2011 study³ compares inspection systems in 17 countries. It describes differences in approach to inspections in each country, particularly as they tried to balance the goals of accountability and school improvement. This kind of information provides needed context and options for policymakers.

Oddly the report provides a rather flat portrait of the very inspection system it advocates and is almost devoid of useful context. Readers are given too little information about how the English inspection system came into being and how it evolved over time. In fact, the system of school inspections is nearly as old as public funding of education in that country. Starting in 1839, Her Majesty's Inspectors were used, in part to satisfy questions about how public money was used in schools.⁴ In more recent times, the system of inspections changed. After the National Curriculum was adopted in 1988 and relevant standardized tests were initiated, the inspection service became part of a national accountability regime, albeit one meant to supplement test results. As in the U.S., a change in government (in the English case from Conservative to Labour) did not mean a reversal of accountability policy. In fact, one writer⁵ argues that the intensity of Ofsted's inspections and their consequences increased under the governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. In that writer's words, "Ofsted became more powerful under New Labour with its role substantially widened to monitor and raise standards and tackle 'failure across different sectors of education.'"⁶ Changes to the inspection system implemented in 2012 also bear watching, such as focusing more of inspector's time on teacher observation. This is a system in motion, but one that has maintained a strong grip upon English schools over time.⁷

Finally, there is the other unanswered question, "Why select England in the first place?" Without international comparisons, readers of this report may simply conclude that England's educational results far exceed those of the U.S. Yet, according to the 2009 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results,⁸ this is not the case. The U.S. scores somewhat higher than England in reading, slightly lower in mathematics, and lower in science. Nations with scores far higher than those of either England or the U.S., such as

Finland, are never mentioned. The report gives no rationale for excluding all other examples in favor of England.

How effectively does the report alert readers to important challenges to the English school inspection system?

It seems unlikely that any system for school improvement can be wholly positive, and a comprehensive report should provide reasoned caveats to readers. Unfortunately, this report fails to do so. The literature on English school inspections is wide and covers many perspectives. I mention several examples that raise important areas of concern.

After quoting results from one school inspection, the report describes the tone as “bracingly frank” (p. 1). Yet the examples given can just as easily be read as generalized, harsh, and even scolding. A quote from one inspection reports tells teachers, “Teaching is too often pitched at an inappropriate level as assessment of pupils’ attainment is not used sufficiently well to plan effective lessons” (p. 1).

Perryman⁹ critiques the whole concept of inspection systems as simply external control of schools and teachers, rather than helpful guidance toward mutually agreed ends. In this description, teachers are reduced to authority-pleasing performers. This would especially be true in schools deemed to be failing. Thrupp criticizes inspections as tools to empower accountability agencies in what he calls a politics of blame:

The politics of blame involve an uncompromising stance on school performance in which the quality of student achievement is seen as the result of school policies and practices and any reference to broader sociopolitical factors is ruled out as an excuse for poor performance.¹⁰

Building on the theme of inspections as political power-playing, Fielding believes that the inspection system, by its very nature, is anti-democratic and that the concept of accountability should be replaced with the more democratic practice of reciprocal responsibility, where all parties take on the work of school development, not by external force, but from their own internal drive to support learning.¹¹ In its current form, Fielding believes, those who inspect simply have too much power over those who are inspected. Issues of curriculum narrowing, a common concern regarding NCLB, are also found in the literature on the English inspection system, as are concerns for alienated students who simply do not care about the prescribed curriculum and its allied tests.¹²

Moving to more specific but no less serious issues, the report describes consequences prescribed for schools falling into the two lowest categories, “Notice to Improve” and “Special Measures” (about 4% of schools fell into each of the two categories in the 2009-2010 school year). For instance, schools in either category have 10 working days after hearing their results to present an action plan in response. This sounds like an impressive and efficient way to deal with schools, but it raises two questions. First, what do schools do if they disagree with the findings of their inspection report? The report does not mention an appeal process, yet the Ofsted site provides detailed explanation of how complaints may

be made during and after an inspection. Second, what kind of comprehensive plan can a school reasonably be expected to design in this short period of time? This point is doubly worrying, since schools in these categories may also be burdened with limited financial resources in the first place.

The possibly disruptive impact of negative inspection results on school governing bodies has also been noted.¹³ The report only makes passing reference to the schools' self-evaluation, but some consider this to be an important and often underutilized part of the existing English inspection process.¹⁴

It may be that a convincing case can be made to refute all of these issues and, therefore, support the proposition that the English inspection model should be emulated. But the report does not take the necessary steps to do so.

How effectively does this report illuminate the evaluation of quality teaching in the English inspection system?

Improving teacher quality is a high priority for education policymakers and practitioners in many countries, so the question of how the English school inspection system determines what is good teaching is important. While teacher quality is discussed, the report does not mention the work done in England, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands to develop teacher evaluation instruments.¹⁵

The report provides a rubric used by inspectors to judge quality teaching. According to this rubric, outstanding teaching is described in this way:

Teaching is at least good and much is outstanding, with the result that the pupils are making exceptional progress. It is highly effective in inspiring pupils and ensuring that they learn extremely well. Excellent subject knowledge is applied consistently to challenge and inspire pupils. Resources, including new technology, make a marked contribution to the quality of learning, as does the precisely targeted support provided by other adults. Teachers and other adults are acutely aware of their pupils' capabilities and of their prior learning and understanding, and plan very effectively to build on these. Marking and dialogue between teachers, other adults and pupils are consistently of a very high quality. Pupils understand in detail how to improve their work and are consistently supported in doing so. Teachers systematically and effectively check pupils' understanding throughout lessons, anticipating where they may need to intervene and doing so with striking impact on the quality of learning (p. 13).

While inclusion of this rubric is appreciated, the report fails to explain how it is possible for inspectors to come to such a decision based on only two days of observation in which each inspector is required to see more than one classroom. Perhaps on the two days of inspection, a given teacher did show excellent subject matter knowledge and was "acutely aware of their pupils' capabilities" (p. 13). How can we be sure that these two days were

reasonable samples of an entire year's work? There may well be a satisfactory answer to this question, but it was not offered in this report.

According to the Ofsted rubric (p. 13) provided in this report, an outstanding teacher has "excellent" subject knowledge. A good teacher has "strong" subject knowledge, a satisfactory teacher is "secure" in his or her knowledge. What is meant by these words? How was that meaning derived? When does excellent become merely strong and how would we know? What allowances are made for different stages of a teacher's career? To what extent does the system encourage imaginative teaching as opposed to rigidly following the set curriculum¹⁶? How can the limited time allowed for inspections make such judgments possible? How does the English inspection system guarantee inter-rater reliability? Each of these questions is compounded by the fact that Ofsted relies on many contracted inspectors in addition to its own corps of inspectors (p. 12). In this critical area, the report raises more questions than it answers.

In all three areas, the report falls short. Policymakers and practitioners should rest any decision to follow the English example on solid evidence that it is the best possible model. Such evidence is not provided. They should be comfortable that difficult questions challenging such a system have reasonable answers. This information is not to be found. Finally, central issues, such as how inspections can fairly evaluate teacher quality, need to have logical, evidence-based answers. This, too, is not included. Until such information is available, decision-makers would be well advised to hesitate.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice.

How well does the English inspection system fit into the current U.S. policy environment?

If the purpose of this report is to suggest an alternative to states in what is called the post-NCLB era, then it is reasonable to ask how that can be accomplished in the real world of federal policy decisions and deadlines. If it makes sense to establish an inspectorate like the English model, then serious work in design and the training of inspectors would need to take place. This means finding the twin resources of time and money. Unfortunately both are in very short supply at the moment. State budgets for education have been tightened in almost every part of the country due to the impact of the recession. Time is also in short supply: the U.S. Department of Education has provided a window for states to design and propose waivers to NCLB. However, this must be done over the course of a few months, and these plans need to be evaluated by an outside panel prior to any discussions or negotiations. Furthermore, the guidelines for waivers continue a heavily test-based school and teacher evaluation system. Grafting an inspectorate system on the current direction does not appear realistic. This is not an environment friendly to creative experimentation. In this way, the suggestion of an inspectorate may have merit, but our current policy environment is not conducive to such an effort.

It is understandable for states to be seeking a way out of the current NCLB regulations, especially their reliance on high-stakes testing as the sole measure of education quality. At the time of this writing, over a dozen states are making such an effort. In order to make

sound judgments, states need clear information about alternative approaches, hence the possible attraction of publications such as the one reviewed here. Unfortunately, due to its limitations, the potential for *On Her Majesty's School Inspection Service* to provide such help is marginal at best.

Notes and References

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