

Governing by Inspection (2): Redesigning school inspection in England and Scotland

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The growth of audit, performance management and regulation along with the involvement of business and the third sector, are evident to different degrees in the governing of education in England and Scotland. This Briefing reports on research that explores the connection between changes in the ways in which education and other social and public services are governed, and the changing political landscape in both countries, with a particular focus on the redesign of their inspectorates. It also highlights the kinds of knowledge and the working practices that are associated with the different modes of inspection in each system.

- ▶▶▶▶▶ Governing has changed to reflect the presence of more varied actors (businesses, communities, voluntary organisations) organised in networks and in decentralised and distributed organisational forms.
- ▶▶▶▶▶ In highly decentralised systems these developments create a need for measures of performance that ensure (minimum) standards: these are often data-based, but also involve negotiation and mediation by key actors, including inspectorates of education to bridge the gap between the centre and the schools.
- ▶▶▶▶▶ The changing politics of the UK since the election of the SNP government in Scotland and the formation of the UK coalition government contribute to an increasingly divergent policy backdrop to the redesign of inspection systems, as England's education 'system' becomes ever more complex and varied, but also more highly centralised, and Scotland's remains largely homogenous, locally accountable and publically-provided.
- ▶▶▶▶▶ In England, Ofsted contributes to the work of governing in a highly centralised but varied context through the enforcement of data-based standards of performance and by strong regulation, increasingly focused on underperformance. In Scotland, the inspectorate seeks to promote greater school-based capacity and autonomy by bridging the space between the centre and the schools through encouraging self-assessment and by 'teaching' best practice.
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Introduction: Governing by Inspection

Inspection has its origins in the attempts of nineteenth century European states to regulate potentially problematic sites and practices. In England, for example, inspectorates were established to deal with a variety of public functions (prisons and police as well as schooling). Inspectors were servants of the central state, yet possessed a certain independence indicated by their designation as Her/His Majesty's Inspectors. In recent years, inspectorates of education in England and Scotland have changed in significant ways: in this *Briefing* we discuss what these changes tell us about the work of inspectorates in contemporary governing and discuss some differences in their governing role in the two systems.

The renewed role for inspection connects, we suggest, to current developments in governing, as a 'new architecture of governance' takes shape involving new agents and interests (Ball 2008). These governing forms often engage new actors in policy-making and, in so doing, develop networks that require information sharing and collaboration between different sources of authority – public and private – for example, corporations, communities and consumers. In turn, particular forms of knowledge and expertise become valued and mobilised, especially those that may bring coherence to dispersed and decentralised public services. Here performance data and benchmarking play an important role. Indeed, varieties of audit, target setting and monitoring, forms of external performance management and inspection all attempt to fill the gap between centralisation and decentralisation and to bridge the distance between the governing 'centre' and specific sites of practice such as schools. It is against this backdrop that school inspection is being redesigned.

The Changing Politics of the UK

A second important contextual feature is the shifting political landscape of the UK, which also influences the redesign of inspection. Devolution of powers to a Scottish parliament in 1999 'reserved' some areas of social and public policy to UK government control but not education. The Scottish National Party (SNP) has formed the

Scottish Government since 2007, and its core political project is independence for Scotland, a position which obviously challenges the reserved powers. The SNP's project is in tension with the UK government not only on the fundamental issue of independence but also, increasingly, in their use of the rhetoric of social democracy and referencing of a social contract modelled on small, strong European states.

Political differences were sharpened with the formation of a UK Coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in 2010, coinciding with deepening financial recession, and by the Coalition's commitment to accelerated deficit reduction driven by reduced public spending rather than increased taxes. In education, as in other areas of social and public policy, the UK government's agenda reflects a resurgence of neo-liberal principles, enabling private sector involvement in providing and running services, increased charging for services, deregulation and in a move away from universalist principles of provision of services.

Education Policy

These political differences are reflected in education policy in the contrast between the continuing relatively homogenous provision of publicly provided, locally accountable education in Scotland and the increased diversity of provision and providers in England that is accompanied by a much-reduced role for local authorities. Academy schools sponsored by business, faith or voluntary groups now make up nearly half of all state schools in England, and Free schools established by a wide range of proposers, including charities, universities, businesses and groups of parents are growing in number. At the same time as forms of provision proliferate, the Secretary of State for Education in England has centralised authority in the system in order to drive the market revolution, increased the requirements on the system to meet attainment targets, and strengthened the powers of school inspectors, especially in targeting underperformance. In Scotland, the SNP government's education policy continues to emphasise publically-provided free state education including support grants for school,

further and higher education students, and opposition to privatisation. Changes in the role of the inspectorate there have enhanced their development and improvement functions. We now explore these changes in more detail.

Inspection in England

The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) was created in 1992 as part of the successive Conservative UK governments' reforms of education, continued under New Labour, that promoted greater autonomy for schools, greater choice for parents and which put a new emphasis on forms of audit and inspection as means of managing dispersed or fragmented systems of provision.

Ofsted inspects on an almost industrial scale. The methodology has changed over time in the search for a reliable means of standardised judgement across a workforce recruited not only from Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) but also from part-time inspectors trained and employed by a number of commercial agencies. Ofsted developed a succession of frameworks in order to evaluate schools, judging them as outstanding, good, satisfactory or inadequate. Until the UK coalition government took office, Ofsted was expanding its remit to include different aspects of children's welfare as well as schooling. Although constant change in the frameworks made assessment of the impact of inspection difficult, it was at least partly driven by underlying anxiety about costs and 'gaming' the system, as a former senior chief inspector explained:

(...) but I was increasingly of the view and indeed Ofsted's own evidence suggested it – that it looked as though we were increasingly getting less of a return on our investment.'

The arrival of the Coalition Government produced significant change in school inspection, requiring a focus on 'core business' (teaching, learning and pupil behaviour) (Ofsted 2012). Inspection is now more targeted: schools failing to improve may be inspected annually. At the same time, the amount of performance data made available to parents and the public to inform school choice and support accountability is increasing, and data often dominate the inspection process, as this quotation from a headteacher suggests:

'If all you are going to look at is the data then why bother coming into school?'

The new framework replaced the 'satisfactory' grade with 'requires improvement' and very sharply reduced the number of individual judgements that inspectors are required to make: this undoubtedly puts increased pressure on the inspection team, as a senior Ofsted strategic manager noted:

'... the verbal and textual recommendations [of inspection] become much more important, so it's really very dependent on the skills of the inspector and on the need to be specific, to make clear recommendations and yet to be careful not to start instructing the school.'

He goes on to say that:

'this change in the framework is a massive test for us as an inspectorate. It is very high stakes - if the proportion of failing/satisfactory schools doesn't start to fall, the credibility of inspection as an agent of improvement falls.'

To summarise, the governing work of Ofsted is primarily regulatory, enforcing centrally set standards across a distributed system.

Inspection in Scotland

Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education in Scotland promote an identity as "teachers" of good practice within Scotland (and, indeed, Europe see *Briefing No. 64*). The framework that the inspectorate in Scotland uses (*How Good is our School?*) positions them as guides and enablers of quality assurance processes that are built and maintained by the school, while the relative homogeneity of the system enables the inspectorate to offer a national perspective against which the school can judge its performance:

'... Inspection is part of that self-evaluation (...). What the inspection is providing is the mirror of a national perspective against which a school can reflect its own performance.' (Senior Scottish Inspector)

In 2011 the inspectorate was merged with Learning and Teaching Scotland (the former curriculum development agency) to create Education Scotland, thus heavily underlining the alignment of inspection with improvement and

development. The new model of inspection and the whole philosophy of Education Scotland is to provide, within one body:

'... both that facility to provide a reflection on the national perspective, but at the same time corral the resource that is required to provide support to the school.' (Senior Scottish Inspector)

The development of a partnership view of inspection places a premium on support and developmental practices, reinforced by psychological training that seeks to develop appropriate skills. In fact:

'... how you inspect is almost more important than being right, in terms of making the judgments. I remember one time, 20 years ago, the absolute – getting the judgment right was what mattered, nothing else – whereas now it's the social skills of being able to manage inspection to the point where you leave the school actually able to improve because they accept and are with you on the agenda – that's the real skill of inspection.' (Scottish Inspector)

The governing work of the inspectorate, then, is focused on 'teaching' the system, and embedding the practice of self-regulation in the schools.

Conclusions

Our research identifies significant differences between England and Scotland in the redesign of their respective inspectorates. We also suggest some alignment between these developments and the backdrop of changing UK politics.

The SNP government's project requires the promotion of governing practices and relations that are apparently consensual, inclusive and seem to shift power and authority downwards. School self-evaluation and the emphasis on inspection as development align the inspectorate with new governing practices and encourage the

development of new knowledge forms and practices. In contrast, Ofsted preserves its authority through a more traditional policing of the system and by identifying institutional and professional failings.

The material presented here highlights significant differences in the governing 'projects' in England and Scotland, as evidenced in the different kinds of governing work that inspectors are being asked to do.

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