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Knowledge, Authority and Judgement: the changing practices of School Inspection in England.

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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 and 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 school evaluation: most dramatically the reclassification of the evaluation of 'satisfactory' to being 'requires improvement'. The paper explores what political and governmental pressures 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.

Keywords:

Knowledge, evidence, expertise, authority, judgement, evaluation criteria, discourses, practices.

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 gained from the case study of inspection in England (outlined below) the paper then goes on to 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 Foucaultian thinking about knowledge in which knowledge is understood as being 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, 1969:24)

In this view, the discourses that claim the authoritative status of truth (and thus 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: 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 whilst 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, et al., 2013:2). 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’ (Clarke, 2011) within a specific field of practice. 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: 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 and the ways in which public perceptions of the legitimacy of forms of evidence 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. Taking this view of evidence in practices of evaluation further, we also draw on the work of Ernest House who argues that all evaluation is a form of persuasion (1980: 71). Providing 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 rare ... subject to serious scrutiny, evaluations always appear equivocal. (ibid: 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, the paper examines 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 upon data from The ESRC project: Governing by Inspection: inspection in England, Scotland and Sweden.¹ The project explores ways in which national systems of school inspection work in their own jurisdictions and 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, Lawn et al., 2013:1).

The study takes an idiographic case study approach, investigating a series of local cases in each country (Gomm, Hammersley et al., 2000), 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, 2006:29). The multiple case study approach "begins with recognising what concept or idea binds the case studies together," (ibid: 23). In this study this was achieved by analyzing national data in the form of thematic and political documentation concerning school inspection in combination with local inspection data, drawing upon analysis of 50 inspection reports in each local setting. We have also conducted interviews with national and local actors (inspectors of different kinds, local authority School Improvement Advisors and head teachers).²

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.

Interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours and followed a semi structured approach (Holstein & Gubrium, 2001). 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).

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 funds from 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 educational 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 about 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, 2008:123).

The new agency was granted far greater regulatory powers than its predecessor. It has employed a succession of frameworks in order to evaluate schools (Ofsed, 2005; Ofsted, 1993, 2009b, 2012b, 2012c), judging them within a framework of categories: outstanding, good, satisfactory or inadequate. The 'satisfactory' judgement was changed to 'requires improvement' in September 2012 in order to reflect the emerging

political and educational regime's vigorously articulated sense of dissatisfaction with the term 'satisfactory' (Garner, 2012). Satisfactory was viewed by both the Secretary of State for Education and the incoming 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 judgements, Ofsted and its inspection teams have constituted discourses of excellence 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 (see for further discussion Baxter & Clarke, 2013). Concomitantly the judgements of being a 'failing school' have had powerful knock on effects within communities, going so far as to lower house prices and cause an exodus of 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. 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).

Such statements suggest the breadth and depth of the impact of discourses of inspection, discourses which are embedded in a range of political, social and cultural as well as educational, understandings, and which permeate lives and communities

their impact reverberating across these domains and creating cohesions and schisms within these contexts.

Following on from House's idea of evaluation as persuasion, the discourses created by the inspectorate aim to create a bridge between educational policy and definitions of school success that establishes a schema, a frame or a way of understanding educational attainment within England. These discourses function as theoretical constructs, articulated in official documents such as inspection reports and thematic documents (see for example Ofsted, 1999; Ofsted, 2003) in order to create a sense of what Chilton terms a "neutral reality" (2003:51) in which the public are enjoined to accept by the very 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: 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 (see for further discussion Baxter & Clarke, 2012b). The vision of success and raised standards, used within them 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 metaphor and including systematic expressions such as , coming to a cross roads, moving ahead towards a better future, not deviating from plans...(Chilton, 2003:45)

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; Beere, 2012), to national and international conferences in which the English system of inspection 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 to what extent pedagogical discourses have become entangled with Ofsted requirements. The book's emphasis appears to be on presenting your 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: 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. (ibid: 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 due to the inspectorates 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 (see Baxter, 2013)

Certainly, some of the head teachers whom 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 also thought this made such inspectors more prone to make judgements without responding to the specifics of the school under inspection. Others talked about the importance of current experience of running a school as a critical resource for inspections – and for the schools being inspected. One 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 whilst only performing at most one inspection per term has implications in terms of the way in which this knowledge lends itself to the work of inspection (for further discussion see Baxter & Clarke, 2012a; Baxter & Hult, 2012). It also raises questions around the performative nature of inspection: what type of evidence will these teacher/head teacher inspectors instinctively privilege and how this will integrate with the type of knowledge they are expected to privilege as inspectors.

Publications by Ofsted state that inspectors inspect ‘without fear or favour’ (Ofsted, 2012e) and that 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; one that supports school development

while also legitimizing inspection judgements and credibility of evidence. This apparent 'teacher to teacher' discussion is powerful on several levels: tapping into the notion of professional dialogue, inspectors employ their own school experiences in order to justify decisions. This can be a powerful effector in the bridging of school/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, raising tensions in terms of one form of professional knowledge gained as a teacher and 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 teacher 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 behavior, 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 and sometimes paradoxical nature of these accounts of what constitutes knowledge and evidence in inspection is compounded by the differing ways in which statistical data contributes 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 English inspectorate has historically used a mix of qualitative observations combined with statistical 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 driven by the desire to compete internationally (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005; Grek, Lawn et al., 2009) , has led to the development of, 'One of the most extensive educational data banks in the world' (Parliament, 2011).

This data emanating from this school data management system (RAISEonline ³) is used as evidence by the inspectorate alongside other data gained 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 evidence that combines with inspector professional knowledge in order to produce a judgment. The recent 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: the classroom as an occluded place in which teachers operated free from parental and government intervention and one in which, more pejoratively still, the

³ 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.' (<https://www.raiseonline.org/About.aspx>: accessed 08.11.2013).

inspectorate employed this professional judgment to obfuscate and hide 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 headteachers and governors. (Wilshaw, 2013)

The creation of Ofsted as ‘The parents’ friend’ attempted to counter these professional closures through the development of an inspection system which looked to address transparency by introducing publicly revealed judgments supported by an extensive Inspection Handbook which articulated in minute detail, every aspect of the before, during and after of the inspection process (Maw, 1995; Ofsted, 1993, 1993b).

More recently, a number of Parliamentary inquiries questioned the appropriateness of what had become condemned as a ‘tick box’ approach to inspection (Ofsted, 2004; Parliament, 2004 and 2011). Questions about whether reporting on 28 different topics, and the lack of depth this implied, suggested an overloaded inspection process and one that was no longer fit for purpose. The White Paper on Schooling introduced by the incoming Coalition in 2010 demanded a recentering on schooling and its inspection on ‘The Importance of Teaching’, whose direction was reflected in a 2012 Framework in which just four judgments replaced the previous twenty eight (Ofsted, 2009a, 2009b, 2012c, 2012f). The new Framework returned to a heightened emphasis on the professional judgment of its inspectors: analysis of the documentation revealed a 40% increase in use of the word professional in this Framework as compared to the 2009 version. Whilst a shorter more simplified Framework was initially welcomed by both inspectors and head teachers, but 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 , em , but in truth its focusing on what matters: the behaviour , the teaching and how well leadership and management are driving all of this , and er generally, I think that the inspectors are happy about this , this aspect of the structure, the focus. (EP12)

The increased emphasis on the professional judgment 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 judgments. Up until 2012 three forms of data were used in the evaluation of English schools:

-raw and aggregated data about attainment

-value added data.

-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 to view both school and pupil individual performance, as well as in which to organise and frame comparison with other schools both locally and nationally. In turn, such data, once

harvested and interpreted by international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, can illustrate some difficult comparisons with other nation members.(OECD, 2010b, 2012).

A diachronic analysis of the use of statistical data in inspection reflects changing political influences on schools since the creation of Ofsted in 1992 (see Baxter, 2013).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; see DFE, 2012) this is not considered as part of the inspection data.

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 (see for further discussion Grek, 2008; Grek, Lawn, 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 achieve on the international education stage. In addition, the arrival of a new Her Majesty’s 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 since then 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 lack of improvement or stagnation. 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. 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 types of data deemed appropriate has created a dilemma for both schools and inspectors. Whilst RAISEonline data gives an indication of pupil progress it does 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 ⁴

It's the rigidity of the system, given that this is a relatively deprived school. Now we have a very clear indicator that of 19 thousand schools on a database of Pupil Premium, our score is 46% of free school meals six; which is high. So we are in the 85th 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 primacy of carrying out in-school observations and inspections, reflections from a number of school leaders indicated that although they valued on-site inspections, in

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>

their view in many cases judgements had already been made on the basis of the statistics: that the knowledge 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 there is a 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, the LEA: 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 local authority staff working with schools had declined from forty to two in a two year period. This decline, partly due to lack of funding and partly due to political manoeuvres 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 on both inspection and school improvement possessed by LA school advisors is now lost (Douette, 1993; Edwards, 1994). An increasing number of schools now buy in services and pedagogical advice and contract inspectors 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 (see for further discussion Humphrey, 1989). The effects of both 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 than ever, despite their vulnerabilities and contestations.

Conclusion

In this paper, we set out to discuss the shifting nature of knowledge and evidence within the English system of inspection and the way in which this impacts upon discourses of inspection. As House outlines: ‘The question of how the public interest and the interests of all parties are to be represented in an evaluation is critical’ (House, 1980:175). 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 inception of Ofsted in its guise as ‘The parents’ friend’, yet an important question for the inspectorate must be whether the element of public interest is still at the heart of the inspectorate or in the intervening years, or has the agency shifted to a greater representation of other interests: not only those of government, but also those of the agency itself, which, unless it can retain credibility, risks extinction.

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 the act 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 real power of inspection lies. This study revealed that 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 autonomies granted to individual and federated schools present substantial challenge for how they can be governed.

The shifting emphases placed on context related knowledge evidence appears as a theme throughout this study, in terms of both the type and nature of evidence deemed valid at any one time (such as 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 inspector, 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 ensure credibility and create legitimacy for the inspectorate.

Any investigation into forms of knowledge and evidence privileged by the inspectorate would be incomplete if it failed to reveal those forms that are ignored or side lined. In this particular study it is those forms that perhaps reveal most about the current system. The exclusion of socio-economic impact on school performance (e.g., via CVA), rather than levelling the playing field, 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 really 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 (what many of our respondents refer to as the problem of 'inconsistencies'). Will such gaps of theory and practice undermine the capacity of inspection to provide hegemonic representations of what good education in England looks like?

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