

THE REVIEW

RETHINKING SCHOOL INSPECTION. IS THERE A BETTER WAY?

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Reviewer: Frank Norris, independent chair, Blackpool Education Improvement Board

I rose through the ranks of HMI with Ofsted to be a divisional manager responsible for the development of school inspection frameworks. I left, exhausted after implementing a second framework within nine months in 2012 and have never inspected a school since.

As I started Tracey O'Brien's book, I was reminded of bold shifts in inspection methodology and how they were introduced to make inspection a fairer process.

A good example was the 2005 education act, which made inspections shorter and more frequent along with introducing contextual value-added measures in 2006. The ongoing adaptations to the framework since, as the author points out, have often been driven by political choices. The abandonment of the self-evaluation form to reduce the burden of inspection on schools is a classic example.

These changes have also coincided with a reduction in Ofsted's overall budget as part of a national austerity drive. Subsequent Chief Inspectors have tried to make changes fit within the 2005 framework – a case of trying to overfill a small pot.

All of which is to say that historical perspective matters when assessing our inspection model and its effectiveness. Rethinking School Inspection is not an academic study, and doesn't try to be. It oozes with personal examples drawn from O'Brien's experiences and those of notable school leaders, and the resulting realism and humanity underpinning its insights are a major strength.

O'Brien's description of the formulaic nature of inspection in recent years is a case in point. Examples of the type of questions lead

inspectors may pose during the initial 90-minute phone call with the headteacher (22 of these on the curriculum alone) make a powerful case that the current system is both exhausting and nerve-racking.

Where the book is less effective is in providing a clear insight into whether Ofsted delivers on its aim of 'raising standards, improving lives'. Ofsted, it seems to me, is struggling to find its place between the poles of improver and controller – or, as Anne Kean puts it, 'watchdogs or visionaries'.

It would have been helpful to draw this tension out in more detail.

The sections that consider how other countries, including those in the UK, undertake inspection give insight into O'Brien's preferred approach. She provides considerable detail about inspections in Wales and how it has abandoned grades and shifted to a more collaborative and supportive approach.

It is notable that these changes have been introduced at a time when the country's approach to curriculum has also been reformed.

There is a sense here that inspection can be used effectively to support other major changes in education policy if the relationship with those being inspected is respectful and honest. It is a pity that more pages are not dedicated to explaining how other parts of the world hold schools to account and use inspections, if at all.

O'Brien brings everything together well at the end, explaining the changes she would like to see introduced to improve school inspection. This isn't just a call to scrap this or that. She indicates what she would replace current practices with, and nearly all her suggestions

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align with my own thinking.

These include the removal of grades, the return of the self-evaluation form, strengthening of peer reviews as a key evidence source, removing safeguarding from Ofsted's remit and deploying inspectors to phases of education they are most familiar with.

The book's lack of historical perspective affects its conclusions, with O'Brien proposing phase-specific frameworks which would take inspection back nearly twenty years. These were removed because too many schools did not fit within a specific phase, and the landscape has only become more complex since. Placing a greater emphasis on inspectors' skill, knowledge and expertise might be a more effective solution.

Overall though, this is a clear and sharply written book. O'Brien's widely shared disappointment at an accountability system that restricts school improvement rather than encouraging it is palpable.

There surely must be a better way, and this book helps to define what that might look like.



Rating