



Divide and rule

Debbie Hepplewhite continues her points of contention series and looks at the emotive area of inspections.

Introduction

I uphold entirely the need to be accountable for the quality of our teaching. I disagree entirely with the manner in which we are held to account.

I am convinced that we need a radical change in our stressful teaching climate, which many of us attribute to the combination of immense and impractical interference in our schools and a draconian inspection regime. My suggestion is that inspection in its many guises, along with the bureaucratic, target-setting and league tables regime, bring out the worst of human nature and causes untold misery for teachers and pupils alike.

As target-setting and tracking reaches down even into our nurseries, I have no doubt that those in authority have finally and completely lost the plot and it is long overdue that we instigate some 'upwards evaluation' with a view to radical changes.

We witness such extremes of human emotion via the *Times Educational Supplement* online staffroom forums: *Euphoria* when schools pass an inspection with flying colours; *devastation* when a judgement is considered less than just; utter *frustration and bitterness* that there is no public right to reply. How many careers and how much 'health and happiness' has been sacrificed to the inspection process and how cleverly and capably has this has been justified in the name of improving schools and raising standards?

A better way

Ofsted inspections and the 'one side only' public reporting system pre-supposes that there is only one way of making significant improvements. There isn't.

Inspections pre-suppose that the Ofsted criteria for measuring success is correct, and that inspectors use the criteria objectively and make the correct judgements. There is no mechanism by which one can truly question this or even agree to disagree. There is no will to support





people who disagree and the message from union advisers, and others, is there is no point in disagreeing or questioning the processes or the judgements as “*you won’t win*”. And we live in a democracy with freedom of speech and right to reply? Not in this case.

Good teaching can be attributed to many things – but attempts to raise standards by untested national strategies, training during which one cannot ask questions or instigate debate; planning to the minutiae of personalised learning; formal individual target setting; formulaic lesson delivery; bringing teachers out of classrooms for paperwork and putting teaching assistants in their place; levelling in our nurseries; end of key stage testing with movable goal posts and dubious results; and threats of almost instant school closure for struggling schools – are simply not acceptable in my book of humanity.

One of the most debilitating aspects of modern teaching is the growth of classroom monitoring – specifically the measuring of discrete lessons. Whether at the level of HMI inspection or school senior management observations, the culture of formality is spreading like a fungus. Increasingly, I hear that observations by colleagues must be assessed by Ofsted criteria and Ofsted judgements must be made. This is no less than inspection by stealth – and conducted by our own colleagues. It is an insidious development and teachers, in my opinion, should object.

School self-assessment and internal inspection increasingly serves the function of replacing external inspection. But isn’t this to change fundamentally the role of head teachers and senior management to one which is inspectorial rather than one of visionary lead teacher and support? In my experience, teachers value comments about their lessons. They are able to receive well-intentioned constructive criticism, they enjoy the sharing of ideas, and they are inspired through collegial interest. Most are happy to talk about their practice *ad infinitum*. But lesson observations rarely amount to

discussing a teacher’s general practice and their approach to classroom management, their understanding of their pupils, their inspiration and their motivation, their worries and their needs. There is no time for talk.

Most feedback amounts to a few snatched, often inopportune, moments and many teachers doubtless feel that to disagree or argue a point will show them in a poor light. They may be left disappointed, angry and disillusioned. The observer’s opinion will probably prevail. Now such feedbacks are to be accompanied by the stark words ‘unsatisfactory’, ‘good’ – or, disguised as ‘some elements’ were unsatisfactory, some were good. Miserly words indeed. And subjective. No matter how much we professionals try to be objective, we are all different in our teaching styles. We can only give subjective opinions. And little or no respect is afforded to ‘teaching styles’.

But such lesson observations are also potentially divisive. How many times have I sensed an ‘I’m alright, Jack’ attitude from those who receive good to glowing feedback whether from Ofsted inspections or inspections from an adviser or head teacher? It is worrying that such people may rapidly forget or may not truly care about those less fortunate teachers who are perhaps not so naturally talented, or who fail to fit into the mould, or who work in settings with less-than-desirable head teachers where internal politics prevail.

What about teachers in struggling schools? There is no equality in schools. Money does not necessarily follow need and schools in downward spirals are faced with all manner of adversity. The last thing such schools need is pressure and formality. They need hands-on and inspirational leadership and genuine practical support rather than the government initiatives, advisers and inspectors that invariably flood through the doors.

One of my heartfelt opinions is that the measuring of the ‘discrete’ lesson is to totally disregard the entirety of a teacher’s practice. Practice that is massive. Practice that takes up evenings, weekends, often holidays, every waking thought, even some sleeping ones.

Where is the measure/judgement on the feedback form of the teacher’s heart, spirit, commitment, hours spent, relationship with pupils, colleagues, contribution to the staffroom, fundraising, running of clubs, putting on performances, dragging partners in to paint walls and dig weeds. There is so much more. So much more that is never really measured and accounted for. So much more that you know and I know but that the system totally disregards.

