

Playing the Game

The enduring influence of the preferred
Ofsted teaching style

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Foreword

This publication arose from an article in *The Times* on 24 January 2014. It described our claim that Ofsted was imposing educationally harmful child-led teaching methods, which tended to undermine the professionalism of teachers. There was evidence that it was continuing to do so despite the 'subsidiary guidance' issued to inspectors in December 2013 and notwithstanding the letter sent to inspectors by Sir Michael Wilshaw on 22 January 2014. Sir Michael reacted with self-defined fury and declared to journalists that he was 'spitting blood'.

We had planned to publish a short report following up earlier publications in 2006 and 2008. The 2006 book by Anastasia de Waal was called *Inspection, Inspection, Inspection: How Ofsted Crushes Independent Schools and Independent Teachers*, and it was followed by a second study, *Inspecting the Inspectorate*, in 2008. However, when Sir Michael Wilshaw declared that he had already solved the problem we delayed the original report so that we could investigate whether or not his instructions had been heeded by inspectors. Civitas research fellow, Robert Peal, analysed 130 Ofsted inspection reports carried out between September and October 2013 (before the changes to the 'subsidiary guidance') and 130 inspection reports carried out between January and March 2014 (after the guidelines had been revised).

Initial examination showed that indicators of a preference for child-led methods fell significantly. However, closer analysis revealed that the change was frequently cosmetic, giving the appearance of change when the underlying realities often remained as before. For example, since May 2014, lead inspectors have been provided with a list of 'banned phrases', such as 'teacher talk dominates too many lessons' and 'children do not have enough opportunities to be engaged in independent learning', along with suggested alternatives such as 'the teacher does give pupils enough time to practise new skills [*sic*]'. To ensure that inspectors did not accidentally give the game away their reports were submitted to Ofsted headquarters where any lingering banned phrases were removed.

The reality now is that many schools no longer know what Ofsted expects. Individual inspectors, still under the influence of discredited child-led approaches from the 1960s, may penalise them because they are enthusiastic about teacher-led professionalism; others may not. A visit from Ofsted now involves the exercise of arbitrary and unpredictable power.

This uncertainty arises not only from Sir Michael Wilshaw's inadequate leadership of Ofsted but also because of an ambiguity in the Government's education policy. It pulls in contradictory directions. The Government has been determined to promote school independence through free schools and academies; but simultaneously it has retained considerable central power. The funding agreements with free schools and academies, for instance, allow the Secretary of State to exert considerable control. Above all, Ofsted can significantly impair the ability of a school to discover better ways of providing new opportunities for children.

Michael Gove's plan for defeating 'the Blob' – his name for the entrenched attitudes that dominate educational practice and academic writing – was to encourage teacher training to move from universities to schools. Instead of formal courses with a bit of practical classroom experience added in, teachers would learn their skills primarily in the classroom under the guidance of experienced teachers. The flaw in this transition is that schools that want to train teachers must have an 'outstanding' grade for teaching quality from Ofsted. As a result, Ofsted has been able to prevent many fine schools from training teachers by grading them 'good' or lower for their quality of teaching. But as Robert Peal's report shows, the grading process is far from being an exact science. It is highly subjective.

Robert Peal recommends the abolition of the teaching grade, but I would go further. The only certain way of overcoming excessive Whitehall interference is to abolish Ofsted in its current form. It is institutionally locked into the era of central compliance and managerially hostile to school autonomy. Sir Michael Wilshaw has freely admitted that he is in favour of central prescription, but experience of Ofsted since the early 1990s reveals that it has not been the consistent and trustworthy ally of high standards in education.

In January 2014 Sir Michael Wilshaw made the extraordinary claim that: 'We have done more to raise standards in 21 years of existence than any other organisation.' It is true that under Chris Woodhead (chief inspector from 1994 until 2000) Ofsted gained a reputation for encouraging higher standards, but even in his time it was an uphill struggle. By the time Christine Gilbert was in charge (from 2006 to 2011), Ofsted had turned the clock back to promote child-led methods. In particular, in the era when education standards were falling but the published achievements were rising, Ofsted proved worse than useless. It not only failed to halt the decline, but provided a smokescreen for the exam boards engaged in a race to the bottom and for schools that were getting good grades by changing lessons into occasions for rehearsal of stock answers. An official report in June 2011, by Lord Bew,

recognised that narrow 'drilling' had become common, squeezing out real learning and denying children a broad education. Lesson time in primary schools was used to rehearse answers parrot-fashion and not to deepen and extend knowledge. Ofsted's silence allowed the public to be deceived.

Its failure to speak up against declining standards was not the only example of Ofsted's under-performance. It also gave false reassurance when concerns were voiced about sectarianism in schools. As recent events in Birmingham have shown, its inspectors gave a seal of approval to schools that were failing to prepare children for life in a free and democratic society.

And yet, the controversy over schools in Birmingham is now being exploited by enthusiasts for state monopoly who have always hated the new freedoms given to academies and free schools. But would a renewal of central control, whether from Whitehall or the local town hall, reduce the chances of extremists taking over schools?

The current scandal only came to light because of public criticism in the press. The problems in Birmingham are not being resolved because Ofsted and the Department for Education used their powers wisely. Concerns had long been voiced. The Cattle report of 2001, commissioned after race riots in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley had warned that some schools were promoting segregation. It referred to a 'depth of polarisation' and said that segregated communities were living 'parallel lives'. A follow-up report about Oldham concluded that problems remained in 2006. Civitas published a study in 2009 called *Music Chess and Other Sins* that warned of the illiberal and separatist tendencies of some schools.¹ Successive governments and Ofsted had known about the problem for years and their silence allowed it to fester.

The case for school independence is the same as the case for a free, open and democratic society. Civilisation advances by allowing all of us to try out our ideas so that we can learn from the successes and failures of others. All such learning is a public process. And so it proved in Birmingham. An academy chain stands accused of abusing its freedom: instead of teaching, it is said to be indoctrinating and, instead of opening up new possibilities, it is thought to be denying equal opportunities for female pupils. The press campaign put a stop to it, and compelled Whitehall to act. Without a press campaign it would still be going on, as it did after the first warnings given to the Department for Education back in 2010.

Sir Michael Wilshaw's response is to call for Ofsted to be given more power, when school independence in the full glare of public debate is far more likely to encourage continuous school improvement than any extension of Whitehall inspection. When politics intrudes too far into education, fads and fashions tend to prevail. School independence gives schools the freedom to resist dubious political priorities. Our school system was saved by the best independent schools continuing to reach for the sky while the state schools, by common consent, were 'gaming' the compliance regime instead of providing opportunities for genuine learning. Ofsted gave this deceptive culture a seal of approval and should never be trusted again.

Ofsted's tentacles even reach into private schools. It should now be prevented from going anywhere near a private school. In addition, it should be prevented from inspecting free schools and academies, but with one exception. It should be permitted to carry out an inspection, if there are reasonable grounds (in the legal sense and therefore subject to judicial review) that a particular school in direct receipt of public funds is so inadequate that its leadership may need to be changed. In other words, there is a case for a kind of Whitehall inspection backstop, but no more.

Independent management of schools, especially those organised in chains or looser alliances or federations, subject to parental choice and unfettered press criticism, continue to be the best safeguard for education standards. There are already a number of academy chains with their own internal quality control systems. Moreover, many schools, including state schools, have formed federations or alliances to share services such as special needs provision and training, and it would be logical for these structures to extend into the provision of professional inspection.

Once the process starts it is very likely that academies will develop more than one independent organisation for school inspection. Most have different educational philosophies. The result will be that we can all learn by comparing them. Above all, the style of inspection could be more about senior teachers giving professional advice to colleagues than handing down arbitrary grades. There is more than one way to run a good school, especially when the intakes vary so radically. Schools should be encouraged to develop their own approaches and to learn from one another – and yes, there should be space for a little eccentricity.

School autonomy through free schools and academies has the potential to transform education in this country, but in its current form Ofsted is a barrier to innovation. The era of imperious central direction should be brought to an end.

David G. Green

Director, Civitas

Executive Summary

Ofsted inspectors have a clear preference for child-centred teaching methods, which is proving persistent despite repeated calls for it to change. This finding is based on an analysis of 260 Ofsted Section 5 inspections of secondary schools carried out between 2013 and 2014 (see [Appendix 1](#) and [Appendix 2](#) online), and a 'call for evidence' amongst teachers of recently inspected schools.

In 2013, 52 per cent of secondary school inspection reports showed a preference for lessons in which pupils learnt 'independently' from teacher instruction. In addition, 42 per cent of reports showed a preference for group work; 18 per cent criticised lessons where teachers talked too much; and 18 per cent criticised lessons in which pupils were 'passive'. Within the entire sample of 130 reports from 2013, there was only one example of an inspector recommending a more teacher-led, and less child-centred approach.

Earlier this year, Sir Michael Wilshaw answered the complaints that Ofsted inspectors harbour a preference for 'progressive, child-centred learning' by claiming that such concerns are 'unwarranted and over the top'.² This research shows that such concerns were in fact justified.

Behind the speech-making, there are grounds for believing that Wilshaw recognises this is a problem. In January this year, he wrote a letter to his inspectors stating, 'please, please, please think carefully before criticising a lesson because it doesn't conform to a particular view of how children should be taught.'³ To measure the impact of Wilshaw's intervention, this report has also analysed a second sample of 130 reports of secondary schools inspected since January 2014. Every indicator of a preference for child-centred teaching fell significantly, aside from group work for which there was still a preference in 38 per cent of reports.

However, further research suggests that this change in the language of written reports is superficial. This report can reveal that since May, lead inspectors have been provided with a list of 'banned phrases', such as 'teacher talk dominates too many lessons' and 'children do not have enough opportunities to be engaged in independent learning', along with suggested alternatives such as 'the teacher does give pupils enough time to practise new skills [sic]'. On more than one occasion, inspection reports have been edited after publication to expunge examples of child-centred language. Such a shallow approach to combatting the preferred Ofsted

style of teaching relies on changing the language of the reports, but allowing the fundamental judgement to remain the same.

Evidence has also been found of an inspector repeating, verbatim, judgements across schools which are sympathetic to child-centred teaching methods – a ‘cut-and-paste’ approach to report writing. Additionally, some respondents to the call for evidence wrote that inspectors are still showing a preference for child-centred teaching in their verbal feedback to teachers and senior leaders. All this evidence suggests that the decline in child-centred language in written reports since Wilshaw’s intervention in January 2014 betrays a change which is more cosmetic than real.

In addition, significant research has shown that graded lesson observations are an imperfect science, as more often than not observation judgements do not correspond with the impact of teaching on long-term pupil achievement.⁴

This finding suggests that Ofsted inspectors are not capable of grading the quality of teaching within a school in a satisfactory fashion, as such a judgement is both subjective and unreliable. It is the recommendation of this report that the ‘Quality of teaching’ grade be removed from Section 5 Ofsted inspections, so that schools are judged according to the three remaining criteria: ‘Achievement of pupils’; ‘Behaviour and safety of pupils’ and ‘Leadership and management’.

This would alleviate the professional culture created by Ofsted which is distinctly in favour of child-centred teaching methods, and prejudiced against more teacher-led alternatives. Teachers are accustomed to putting on ‘jazzy’ lessons, replete with group-work, role play and active learning in order to fulfil what has become widely acknowledged as the ‘Ofsted style’. So strong is the inspectorate’s reputation for favouring trendy teaching methods that the idea of putting on a ‘chalk and talk’ lesson or learning from a textbook with an Ofsted inspector in the room has become inconceivable within the teaching profession.

Ofsted’s influence spreads far further than their intermittent visits to schools. As the chief arbiter of what constitutes ‘good practice’ in the classroom, Ofsted has been able to alter the whole culture of the teaching profession. This can be dated to Wilshaw’s predecessor, Christine Gilbert, who was a vocal supporter of child-centred teaching methods and, as Her Majesty’s Inspector of Schools, made it her stated aim to change the way in which teachers teach.⁵ It was during this new

incarnation under Gilbert that Ofsted gained its new reputation as the 'child-centred inquisition'.⁶

Though Ofsted may only visit a school every few years, the spectre of the inspectorate continually haunts the profession. For teachers, this is mainly exercised through continuing professional development (CPD) and internal performance management – two processes which in recent years have been compelled to dance to the tune of Ofsted, gearing themselves towards the question 'what does Ofsted want to see?' A number of external training providers and popular teachers guides, such as *The Perfect Ofsted Lesson* and *Pimp Your Lesson!*, contribute to this culture, de-professionalising teachers and distracting them from considering how children can best learn.

As a crowning absurdity, in 97 per cent of Ofsted observations, the 'Quality of teaching' grade simply mirrors the 'Achievement of Pupils' grade, suggesting its existence is largely redundant.⁷

For too long, the unnecessary, contentious and unreliable process of grading the quality of teaching has perverted the professional judgement of teachers and schools, and created a damaging culture of accountability towards an 'Ofsted style'. Removing Ofsted's power to grade the 'Quality of teaching' would provide a necessary first step in bringing such a culture to an end, and giving schools the professional autonomy to focus on what teaching methods work best, as opposed to what teaching method Ofsted inspectors wants to see.

Introduction

Shortly after his appointment as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw made a speech to the RSA in April 2012. In it he stated: 'We, and in that word "we" I include Ofsted, should be wary of trying to prescribe a particular style of teaching.'⁸

Wilshaw was addressing a growing concern within the teaching profession that Ofsted was responsible for the promotion in schools of an orthodoxy on how to teach, often termed the 'Ofsted style'. This orthodoxy is based upon child-centred teaching methods and can be summarised as an emphasis on pupil independence, group work and 'active' learning, coupled with an aversion to 'passive' activities such as note-taking, working from a textbook, or listening to teacher instruction. In recent years, this orthodoxy has been criticised for a number of reasons: it is based on an unverified assumption that such teaching methods are evidently superior; it exerts a considerable pressure upon the teaching profession to conform to Ofsted's expectations; and it prevents schools from fully embracing the new levels of autonomy granted by current government reforms.

Child-centred teaching methods have been popular in British state schools from the 1960s onwards, and are often traced back to the 1967 publication of the Plowden Report. Underlying child-centred teaching is a belief that children learn best when they direct their own learning, through methods such as 'discovery' or 'active' learning. Such methods are usually set against a more 'traditional' style of 'teacher-led' or 'whole-class' teaching, where the teacher directs the progress of a lesson. Though highly popular within teacher training and many education institutions, there is little empirical evidence to prove that such methods are effective.

Wilshaw has appeared to be aware that this situation must change. From 2012 to 2013, he made numerous alterations to the Ofsted inspection guidance, all reinforcing the message that there should be no preferred Ofsted style of teaching. However, by the end of 2013, it was clear to many that Ofsted inspectors were still just as likely to judge teaching according to its alignment with a preferred methodology. Under continued pressure, particularly from teachers on social media, Ofsted altered the subsidiary guidance for their inspectors on 23 December 2013. A new section on teaching was more forthright than ever and specifically detailed the teaching methods for which inspectors were *not* to show a preference:

Inspectors must not give the impression that Ofsted favours a particular teaching style... For example, they should not criticise teacher talk for being overlong or bemoan a lack of opportunity for different activities in lessons... Do not expect to see 'independent learning' in all lessons and do not make the assumption that this is always necessary or desirable. On occasions, too, pupils are rightly passive rather than active recipients of learning.⁹

This change to the subsidiary guidance was followed up on 22 January 2014 with a letter from Wilshaw to his inspectors, in which he drew attention to recent reports in which 'independent learning' and 'collaborative learning' were praised, and 'teachers talking too much' was criticised. Wilshaw ended the letter by stating:

In summary, inspectors should report on the outcomes of teaching rather than its style. So please, please, please think carefully before criticising a lesson because it doesn't conform to a particular view of how children should be taught.¹⁰

The first aim of this report is to quantify the extent to which there was a preferred Ofsted style of teaching prior to the changing of the subsidiary guidance on 23 December 2013. This has been done through analysing the language used in a sample of 130 Section 5 Ofsted reports for secondary schools inspected between 10 September 2013, and 15 October 2013 (see [Appendix 1](#) online). The reports have been analysed to measure the frequency of six 'indicators' of the preferred Ofsted style of teaching, all terms that have been highlighted by Wilshaw and others as indicative of the preferred Ofsted style of teaching. They are:

- A preference* for **independent learning**.
- A preference for pupils taking **responsibility** for their own learning.
- A preference for pupils working in **groups**.
- An aversion towards classes in which pupils were **passive**.
- An aversion towards teachers **directing** lessons.
- An aversion towards teachers **talking** too much.

* The word 'preference' here is used to cover both instances in which such teaching methods were praised, and instances in which it was recommended that they should be employed further.

Secondly, this report sought to quantify the extent to which the Ofsted style has receded from written Ofsted reports since the new subsidiary guidance was introduced, by performing the same analysis on a second sample of 130 Section 5 Ofsted reports for secondary schools inspected between 7 January 2014 and 6 March 2014 (see [Appendix 2](#) online). In addition, I have supplemented this analysis with a call for evidence from teachers at recently inspected schools. The findings suggest that though there has been a marked decline in such language in written Ofsted reports, actions taken so far to combat the preferred Ofsted teaching style have been largely superficial.

This report also intends to show how the preferred Ofsted teaching style has gained an ongoing hold in schools which transcends the occasional visits of the inspectors. This is most evident in CPD sessions and internal performance management observations, which are frequently used to train teachers in 'what Ofsted want to see'. Far more strenuous action still needs to be taken for this professional orthodoxy to be overturned.

This report is not a wholesale overview of the structure and functioning of Ofsted. Earlier this year, there was an encouraging convergence in opinion about how the structure of Ofsted should be reformed. In March 2014, the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) circulated their policy position, Policy Exchange published a report into Ofsted entitled *Watching the Watchmen*, and Sir Michael Wilshaw delivered a speech at the ASCL conference. All three of them agreed that the contracting out of inspection services to third party providers (currently Serco, Tribal and CfBT) should be reviewed; the quality of inspectors should be improved; and a new 'two-tier' Ofsted inspection system should be developed. A two-tier system would involve one-day 'short inspections' to check up on schools believed to be doing well, and longer 'in-depth inspections' for schools which are a concern.¹¹ Soon afterwards, it was announced that all inspectors will be trained and employed by Ofsted 'in house' from 2015 onwards, when the contracts with existing service providers run out.¹²

An encouraging consensus on reforming the structure of Ofsted is therefore emerging: Wilshaw joked in his speech that ASCL and Policy Exchange must 'have a mole at Ofsted HQ'. In a letter sent to schools on 1 July 2014, Wilshaw reiterated that 'fundamental changes' will be made to the Ofsted inspection process taking effect from 1 September 2015, including a revision of the section 5 school inspection framework.¹³

However, the question of how to end the Ofsted style of teaching, be it perceived or otherwise, remains unresolved. At its heart, Ofsted is responsible for school accountability, ensuring that failing schools are swiftly recognised and dealt with so that public money is not wasted. This is a function it currently carries out commendably. However, the inspectorate's mission has crept too far beyond this brief into new territories. Through formal lesson observations and its grading of 'quality of teaching', and also through an enormous number of publications such as 'good practice' guidance and subject reports, Ofsted has become the main arbiter of what constitutes 'good practice' within English schools.

This is an unhelpful confusion of the inspectorate's original purpose. An increasing number of organisations offer high-quality professional development for teachers, such as teaching schools, subject associations and charities, leaving little reason for Ofsted to combine the dual roles of providing school accountability and the professional development. As has been observed on the topic of lesson observations, when professional accountability is combined with professional development, neither purpose is served satisfactorily: the accountability judgement is seen as compromised, and the development guidance is resented. Therefore, it is encouraging that the current thrust of proposed changes to Ofsted appears to be towards slimming the inspectorate down to its core duty of finding failure, and away from the distracting and damaging business of divining the causes of success.

However, this direction of reform could be greatly aided by removing the 'quality of teaching' grade from inspection judgements. Such a measure would end the imprecise and unnecessary practice of judging what constitutes high quality teaching within a school.

A Short History of Ofsted

The creation of Ofsted

The debate over whether school inspectors favour particular teaching styles is longer standing than is often realised. According to his memoirs, when Kenneth Baker became education secretary in 1986 he realised that there was something of an orthodoxy on teaching methods within state schools, for which Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education were the 'priesthood'.¹⁴

Establishing the extent of this problem was difficult during the late 1980s, as inspection reports were not made public. However, a number of reports were leaked to politicians and the press. In 1987, Kenneth Baker was leaked the HMI Report for Longdean, a well thought-of comprehensive in Hemel Hempstead. Longdean was academically successful and popular with local parents. However, the school received a poor judgement as its teaching style did not correspond with child-centred teaching methods. The report read:

Not all teachers created a good learning atmosphere... The predominant teaching style allows the pupils to be rather passive. There is a need to focus on a range of teaching methods and, in particular, those which require pupils to be more involved in their own learning.

Maths was singled out for particular criticism, as lessons were 'often unrelated to real-life problems'. An account of Baker's displeasure in the *Times* observed that HMI was coming under fire from critics 'who accuse them of trying to destroy traditional practices in the name of progressive theory'.¹⁵

Two years later, in 1989, HMI inspected a popular grammar school in Stratford-upon-Avon, King Edward VI. The report was leaked. Inspectors acknowledged that the pupils were 'well motivated, well behaved and receptive', and achieved excellent examination results. However, the overall verdict was critical. It claimed that the school had a 'narrow range of teaching styles'; the pupils' needs were not met by the school's 'reliance on "traditional" methods'; and the classroom furniture limited 'the range of teaching styles'.¹⁶ One assumes the desks were in rows.

Such stories led to growing concerns that the HMI inspection system, which was administered by local education authorities, was too unaccountable and that some inspectors were penalising schools for not conforming to their preferences for child-centred teaching methods. Partly in response to these concerns, the 1992

Education (Schools) Act was passed by Kenneth Clarke. The Act stipulated that inspectors had to follow a new National Framework, inspect schools every four years, make their reports available to the public, and include at least one 'lay inspector' in the inspection team. Individual HMIs were moved out of the control of local education authorities and centralised under a new non-ministerial government department known as The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

Ofsted under Woodhead

Hopes that the inspectorate would be weaned off its preference for child-centred teaching were encouraged in 1994 when Chris Woodhead, a vocal critic of progressive education, was appointed as HMCI. Though Woodhead's own views were strong, he could do little to force the inspectors to change their outlook. Much like Wilshaw twenty years later, Woodhead faced repeated battles to get his inspectors to follow the National Framework, and was driven to make public pronouncements that inspectors should not penalise schools according to their own beliefs about teaching.

Woodhead stepped down as HMCI in 2000. In 2002 he wrote *Class War*, recounting his struggle to reform England's schools. He explained that he had been unable to overcome the preference for child-centred teaching methods held by many of his inspectors, writing:

[Inspectors] drag the baggage of their beliefs about the nature of education, how teachers should teach and schools be managed, what it is reasonable to expect inner-city kids to achieve, into the classrooms they inspect... If their baggage was the flotsam and jetsam of progressive education, then, in my judgement as Chief Inspector, we had a problem.

Elsewhere in *Class War*, Woodhead wrote that 'my single biggest doubt about Ofsted stems from the fact that some inspectors are unwilling or unable to jettison their progressive educational views'.¹⁷

Ofsted since 2000

After the departure of Chris Woodhead, the preference for child-centred teaching held by some inspectors went from being challenged, to tolerated, to encouraged. This reached its fullest extent during Christine Gilbert's time as HMCI from 2006 to 2011. Gilbert was a vocal advocate of 'personalised learning', a variation on child-centred education which recast such methods in the modern, managerial language

of New Labour. Two months after her appointment, Gilbert elucidated what was meant by 'personalised learning' in *2020 Vision*, a report written for the DfES.

In *2020 Vision*, one can detect much of the language which would come to suffuse future Ofsted inspection reports: it promoted pupils 'knowing how to work independently without close supervision'; teaching being 'learner-centred'; pupils 'taking responsibility for, and being able to manage, [their] own learning'; and teachers who 'engage children and young people as partners in learning'. The report described 'personalised learning' in these terms:

Learners are active and curious: they create their own hypotheses, ask their own questions, coach one another, set goals for themselves, monitor their progress and experiment with ideas for taking risks, knowing that mistakes and 'being stuck' are part of learning.¹⁸

In a 2007 interview with Peter Wilby of the *Guardian*, Gilbert said of her new role at Ofsted: 'We have to change how teachers work'. As Wilby reflected: 'her central mission, it seems, will be to make Ofsted the national leader in what continentals call pedagogy, pinpointing exactly what works and what doesn't'.¹⁹

Over the following years Ofsted became increasingly vocal about the sort of teaching inspectors wanted to see, morphing into what the teacher-blogger Old Andrew dubbed the 'child-centred inquisition'. Having originally been created in 1992 to waylay the education establishment's preference for child-centred teaching methods, Ofsted from 2006 became the education establishment's most powerful vehicle for promoting such ideas.

Of all of the descriptions favoured by Ofsted to describe their preferred methodology, 'independent learning' has undoubtedly become the most prevalent. As with many terms used to promote child-centred teaching, it is semantically slippery, as it could imply rather traditional practices such as homework or revision. However, as used by Ofsted, independent learning came to mean pupils learning independent of teacher instruction. An 'Independent Learning' literature review for the DSCF explained in 2008: 'The promotion of independent learning requires a new role for teachers, which is based not on the traditional transmission of information, but on process-oriented teaching, which ensures that pupils are actively involved in the learning process'.²⁰

It should be noted that Ofsted does not confine itself to simply producing school inspection reports. Between 2007 and 2012, Ofsted published a number of reports aimed at elucidating their vision of classroom 'good practice'. Such reports consistently showed a preference for child-centred teaching methods and skills-based curriculums.

Curriculum Innovation in Schools (2008) profiled 30 schools which had introduced innovations such as a thematic curriculum, or skills-based learning. One school had designed its year seven curriculum not around discrete academic subjects, but around the following themes: 'journeys', 'identity', 'positive images', 'art attack', 'survival' and 'the power and the glory'. Another school had introduced a new curriculum based on 'developing learning skills' such as teamwork, independent thinking and self-review. The overall report was very favourably disposed towards such innovations, concluding: 'Inspection evidence, observations by senior managers and feedback from pupils showed that the successful innovations had had a significant impact on teaching and learning.'²¹

Learning: creative approaches that raise standards (2010) recommended that all schools should redesign their curriculums to encourage 'creative learning'. Examples included a Year 9 thematic unit on 'Space Rocket'; using 'collaborative problem-solving' to learn about radiation in Year 10; and 'hot seating' to learn about Anne Frank in a Year 6 history course. The report stated that 'All schools should: provide continuing professional development to ensure that teachers and support staff have the knowledge, skills and confidence to encourage pupils to be independent and creative learners'. Under the title 'Creative learning: effective teaching', one section stated that in 'the most effective teaching... teachers guided but did not over-direct pupils'.²²

Inspection Guidance: A preference for child-centred teaching methods was even written into the lesson observation guidance for Ofsted inspectors. The clearest example of this came in a briefing to inspectors in September 2010. Under the heading 'Quality of learning', inspectors were asked: 'Are pupils working independently? Are they self-reliant – do they make the most of the choices they are given or do they find it difficult to make choices? To what extent do pupils take responsibility for their own learning? ...How well do pupils collaborate with others? Do they ask questions, of each other, of the teacher or other adults, about what they are learning?'²³ Inspection guidance from January 2012 still stated that for teaching to be graded 'outstanding', it should promote 'pupils' high levels of resilience, confidence and independence when they tackle challenging activities...

Time is used well and every opportunity is taken to successfully develop crucial skills.²⁴ This language filtered through to the inspection guidance for individual subjects, nearly all of which stated ‘independent learning’ was a precondition of ‘outstanding’ teaching.

Good Practice Guidance: According to the Ofsted website, 115 ‘good practice’ resources were published for schools between 2007 and 2013, as well as videos of outstanding practice posted on their website. These resources consistently promote a child-centred view of teaching. For example, a good practice guide profiling the Peele Community College in 2011 was entitled *Making English Real: creating independent learners in English*. It explained: ‘The primary focus will be on learning, rather than teaching, with students working in partnership with teachers.’²⁵ A good practice guide into Allenbourn Middle School in 2012 entitled *Loosen up to become outstanding in mathematics* promoted an end to the ‘text-book lesson’ and advocated learning maths through activity such as ‘buying and selling’ and playing Cluedo. As the report explained: ‘This often meant turning traditional lessons on their head.’²⁶ The child-centred nature of Ofsted’s good practice videos has been tracked by bloggers such as Andrew Old, even leading to such videos being temporarily removed from the Ofsted website.²⁷

Ofsted Subject Reports: In her recent book *Seven Myths About Education* (2014), Daisy Christodoulou studied the most recent Ofsted subject reports for art, English, geography, history, maths, modern foreign languages (MFL), religious education (RE) and science. In total, these reports included 228 concrete examples of individual lessons. Those lessons which were praised almost exclusively focused on skill development over knowledge acquisition, and placed pupils in control of their own learning. As Christodoulou concluded: ‘For Ofsted, therefore, teacher-led fact-learning is highly problematic... The alternatives they promote involve very little learning of facts, and very much more time spent discussing issues with limited teacher involvement’.²⁸

Conforming to the Ofsted style

After the arrival of Christine Gilbert, schools and teachers soon realised that their inspection grading could rise or fall depending on the extent to which they conformed to this developing ideal of an Ofsted style. ‘What does Ofsted want to see?’ became a question commonly asked by school leadership teams, and ‘jazzy’ became a staffroom byword for the sort of lessons that Ofsted would grade ‘outstanding’.

A boom in organisations offering training in how to excel in Ofsted observations took place (see Chapter 3). Perhaps the most significant relic of this new era was a book published in 2010 entitled *The Perfect Ofsted Lesson*. The book's two authors were associated with the education training provider 'Independent Thinking'. The foreword announced that the days of the 'latter-day witch-finder general Chris Woodhead' were over, and continued that Ofsted were now looking for:

...a focus on learning, the development of thinking skills, opportunities for independent learning, a variety of strategies that take into account different elements of the individual learner's preferences, strengths and weaknesses, the use of positive emotions, great relationships, clear goals, metacognition, creativity and the willingness to take a risk or two...

The Perfect Ofsted Lesson was disparaging of teacher-led lessons: of teaching that involves a 'wise, learned' teacher and pupils 'listening and writing'. 'The neuroscience of learning shows that this type of learning is superficial and quickly evaporates', it claimed.²⁹ To date, *The Perfect Ofsted Lesson* has received 34 reviews on Amazon, run to two editions, been an Amazon-bestseller, and is a fixture in the staffrooms of many English schools. Other titles written along similar lines included *Pimp Your Lesson!: Prepare, Innovate, Motivate and Perfect* (3 editions, 46 customer reviews on Amazon) and *Outstanding Teaching: Engaging Learners* (58 customer reviews on Amazon). Another popular staffroom text, *The Lazy Teacher's Handbook* (94 customer reviews on Amazon), promoted 'lazy teaching' as a means of facilitating independent learning. The author wrote of his philosophy:

When you become a Lazy Teacher, you will employ a series of strategies that put the responsibility of learning directly and consistently on the students... It's Ofsted friendly too, especially in light of the fact that nearly every initiative coming from central government at the moment seems to revolve around individualised, personalised and independent learning.³⁰

The new incarnation of Ofsted as a pedagogical policeman was attacked by the deputy headteacher Katharine Birbalsingh in her semi-autobiographical account of

working in an inner-London school *To Miss with Love* (2011).^{*} She told the story of a no-nonsense West Indian teacher in her fifties who had been teaching for 20 years. Her classroom was calm, her results were good, and she was strong on discipline. However, when Ofsted visited the school they gave her a poor grade. Birbalsingh explained: 'The eradication of the old-school teacher is the single most destructive "improvement" that is taking place in our schools today.'

In another passage, Birbalsingh recounted a CPD session, the like of which will be familiar to many recently trained teachers:

'Right.' Mr Goodheart reclaims everyone's attention. 'I'd like to remind everyone about our push on independent learning. Remember that this is what Ofsted will be looking for, when they finally get here.' He smiles in a way that suggests he doesn't really believe what he is saying. 'We simply cannot have a situation where teachers are teaching and children are listening.' I sit up in my chair, not entirely sure if I've heard correctly.³¹

When Sir Michael Wilshaw took charge as HMCI in January 2012, following the departure of Christine Gilbert, he inherited an inspectorate with a deeply ingrained culture in favour of child-centred teaching. Amongst his most significant challenges in this new role would be overturning such a culture. The main aim of the following chapter is to assess whether Wilshaw has been successful in doing so.

^{*} Birbalsingh's book is a fictional account of a year teaching in an inner-city school, but all characters and events are based upon her actual experiences as a teacher.

The Ofsted Teaching Style

The Research

The aim of this research has been to measure the extent to which a preferred Ofsted style of teaching remains evident in recent inspection reports. In particular, it seeks to assess how far Sir Michael Wilshaw's changes to the Subsidiary Guidance on 23 December 2014, and his letter to the inspectors on 22 January 2014, have been heeded. To do this, two samples of inspection reports have been analysed.

- **2013 Sample:** 130 Section 5 inspection reports of secondary schools inspected between 10 September 2013, and 15 October 2013.
- **2014 Sample:** 130 Section 5 inspection reports of secondary schools inspected between 7 January 2014 and 6 March 2014.

The 'indicators'

For each sample, I have quantified the extent to which the reports show an undue preference for child-centred teaching, whilst criticising teacher-led approaches. This has been done by calculating the frequency with which six different 'indicators' occur in the reports. The six indicators are:

- A preference for **independent learning**.

e.g. 'Students are fully involved in their learning, show interest and are given appropriate opportunities to develop as independent learners.' Kirk Balk Community College (requires improvement, 15.10.2013).

- A preference for pupils taking **responsibility** for their own learning.

e.g. 'A key feature of learning is how students take responsibility for their own learning, working well both independently and collaboratively, and always trying their best.' Maidstone Grammar School (outstanding, 26.9.2013).

- A preference for pupils working in **groups**.

e.g. 'In all lessons there is strong emphasis on group work to develop social skills and to share understanding, and students are frequently encouraged to support each other.' Cardinal Griffin Catholic High School (good, 9.10.2013).

- An aversion towards classes in which pupils were **passive**.

e.g. 'Behaviour is not outstanding because students are often passive learners. This limits their opportunities to make outstanding progress.' Winchmore School (good, 2.10.2013).

- An aversion towards teachers **directing** lessons.

e.g. 'teachers spend too long introducing lessons, or leading a discussion from the front of the class, which slows students' progress. This was seen, for example, in a Year 9 English lesson, which was too dominated by the teacher.' Pensby High School for Girls (good, 18.9.2013).

- An aversion towards teachers **talking** too much.

e.g. 'However, many lessons required improvement because teachers did most of the talking, without checking that students understood, and the pace of learning slowed as a result.' Biddeham Upper School and Sports College (requires improvement, 26.9.2013).

Analysis of 2013 sample

Inspection reports in the 2013 sample showed a significant preference for child-centred teaching methods (see [Appendix 1](#) online). Of all 130 reports, 76 per cent contained one or more of the 'indicators'.

- The most frequent indicator was 'pupil independence', with 52 per cent of Ofsted reports showing a preference in the school's teaching for 'independent learners', 'independent learning skills', 'independent work' and so on.
- The second most frequent indicator was a preference for group work, with 42 per cent of reports containing praise for practices such as 'group work', and pupils 'collaborating' or 'cooperating' with each other.
- 26 per cent of reports showed a preference for lessons in which pupils took responsibility for their own learning; 18 per cent of reports criticised lessons in which pupils were passive; 18 per cent criticised lessons in which teachers talked too much; and 15 per cent criticised teachers directing lessons.

In his public pronouncements, Wilshaw has denied that there is a preferred Ofsted style of teaching. In an interview with the *Sunday Times* on 26 January 2014,

Wilshaw stated that any suggestion that inspectors were biased towards progressive educational ideas was 'nonsensical', whilst in a speech to the Association of School and College Leaders on 21 March, Wilshaw claimed that such concerns about a preferred Ofsted style of teaching (coming in part from Civitas) were 'unwarranted and over the top'.³² The findings from this 2013 sample suggest such concerns were justified.

The Ofsted style prior to January 2014

The clear existence of a preferred Ofsted style of teaching in reports from before December 2013 remains significant for many teachers and schools. Schools will still be using these Ofsted judgments to inform their continuing professional development (CPD) and performance management structures. A number of further points arise from looking at this sample of Ofsted reports.

i. How should schools improve?

The first page of an Ofsted report contains a 'Summary of key findings for parents and pupils'. This is the most impactful page of the report, giving a series of short recommendations for further school improvement. Many of the recommendations assume that a more child-centred approach to teaching is axiomatic with greater pupil achievement. Examples include:

- 'What does the school need to do to improve further? Raise achievement to good by ensuring a higher proportion of teaching is good or better, through... providing more opportunities for students to work independently rather than listening passively to their teachers'. Pittville School (requires improvement, 24.9.2013).
- 'It is not yet an outstanding school because... [t]here are not enough opportunities for students to develop their independent learning skills.' Ashton Community Science College (good, 2.10.2013).
- 'This is a school that requires improvement. It is not good because... [s]tudents are sometimes too passive in lessons because they are not given enough opportunities to take responsibility for their own learning through independent and group work.' Wolstanton High School (requires improvement, 15.10.2013).

Such recommendations can be relied upon to push teachers towards a more child-centred teaching style in anticipation of their next Ofsted inspection.

ii. Teaching methods as behaviour

Normally the evidence for a preferred Ofsted style of teaching can be found in the 'quality of teaching' category of an inspection report. However, a preference for child-centred teaching methods often finds its way into the 'behaviour and safety of pupils' category as well.

In many schools where the behaviour of pupils appears to be good and orderly, behaviour in the school is nevertheless criticised for having insufficiently 'independent' or overly 'passive' pupils. The following are some examples of such judgements included under 'behaviour and safety', which appear somewhat to stretch the detention of the category:

- 'However, behaviour is not outstanding because some students are too reliant on teachers telling them what to do and have not yet accepted full responsibility for their own learning behaviours.' All Saints Catholic School and Technology College (good, 8.10.2013).
- 'Behaviour and safety require improvement because in some lessons students are not actively engaged in their learning.' St Joseph's Catholic High School (requires improvement, 8.10.2013).
- 'When students are asked to become more involved in their learning, for example by working in pairs or groups, they are always willing to do so, and work hard. However, often, students are allowed to remain passive.' Mandeville School (inadequate, 8.10.2013).

iii. Ofsted's non-preferred style of teaching

Whilst a preference for child-centred teaching methods is apparent in over three quarters of the Ofsted reports studied, praise of teacher-led lessons, or criticism of excessive use of child-centred methods, is almost entirely absent.

In the study of 130 reports in the 2013 sample, there was only one instance in which a school was criticised for having an overly child-centred and insufficiently teacher-led approach. The report for Kingsley College (good, 9.10.2013) recommended that in order to 'improve further', pupil progress should be accelerated by 'ensuring that the times when students work things out alone, without direct adult help, are balanced by teachers' explanations where necessary'. Such an unusual endorsement of teacher-led instruction leapt off the page.

iv. Variation amongst lead inspectors

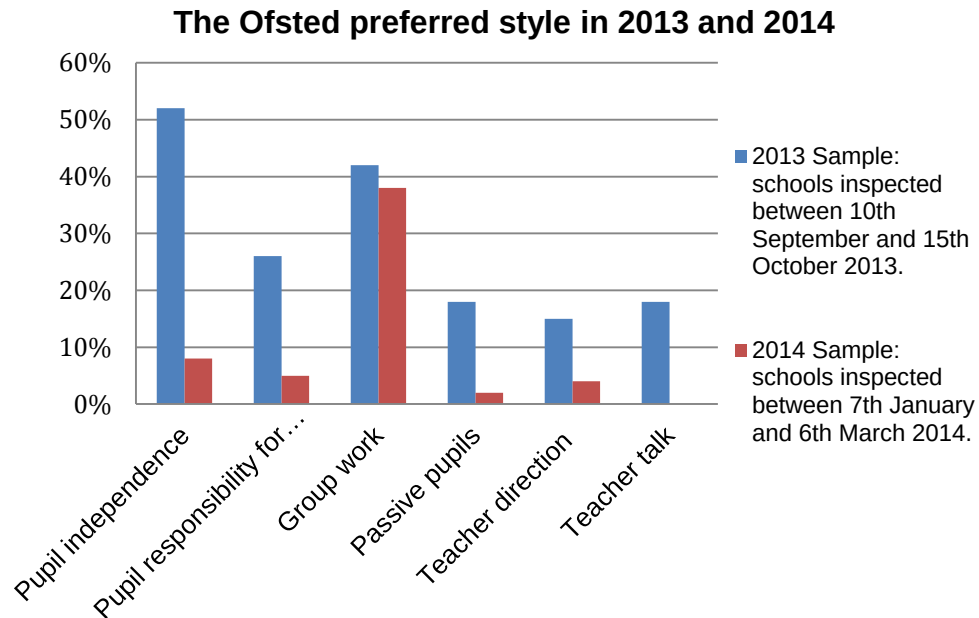
Although more research would be necessary to substantiate such a claim, there is evidence that some lead inspectors are more likely to promote the Ofsted style of teaching in their reports than others. Alan Parkinson, for example, shows little preference for child-centred teaching methods, averaging less than one 'indicator' across four inspection reports. Similarly, Roger Waddingham averages only one indicator per inspection report over three inspections.

On the other hand, the emphasis placed on child-centred teaching methods is well above average in Mary Davis's inspection reports, which average three 'indicators' each. Similarly, Simon Blackburn shows a pronounced preference for child-centred teaching, with an average of 3.5 indicators across two inspections. When Simon Blackburn inspected St Katherine's School (requires improvement, 25.9.2013), his report stated that the school must increase the proportion of good and better teaching by 'ensuring there are more opportunities for students to work independently and with their peers to explore and consolidate new concepts and ideas.'

Analysis of the 2014 sample

The aim of the 2014 Sample has been to establish the extent to which Ofsted inspectors have stopped favouring particular teaching styles since the change to the subsidiary guidance for inspectors in December (see [Appendix 2](#) online). The question of whether written reports can be trusted as evidence for the conduct of a school inspection will be dealt with later in the chapter.

- Inspection reports from the 2014 sample showed a significant drop in every one of the six indicators except for group work.
- The proportion of inspection reports advocating pupil independence dropped from 52 per cent to eight per cent.
- The proportion of inspection reports advocating pupils taking responsibility for their own learning dropped from 26 per cent to five per cent.
- The proportion of inspection reports criticising lessons for creating passive pupils dropped from 18 per cent to two per cent.
- The proportion of inspection reports criticising teachers talking too much dropped from 18 per cent to nought per cent.



The Ofsted style after January 2014

The fall in all indicators of an Ofsted teaching style (with the exception of group work) in written Ofsted reports from the 2014 sample could be seen as evidence of significant change. However, this would be naïve, as further evidence gathered for this report shows that the ingrained preference for child-centred teaching methods amongst many Ofsted inspectors has not been genuinely challenged.

i. Post-publication editing of reports

These changes to the wording in written reports appear to be largely superficial, as such language is edited out during a redrafting process once the original report is submitted by the Lead Inspector. Evidence of this process first arose at the beginning of 2014, when a number of teachers and governors noticed that Ofsted inspection reports were being posted online, only to be taken down and re-posted with the indications of a preference for child-centred teaching methods removed.

The first version of the Ofsted report for De Warenne Academy (requires improvement, 5.12.2013) included the following sentence:

a particular focus on how the best teaching pushes students to think for themselves and work more independently

The report was then edited so that the sentence read:

a particular focus on ensuring students think for themselves and solve problems

The first version also included the following sentence:

In their keenness to guide students and remind them of elements that need to be included in their work to reach higher grades, teachers sometimes over-direct the lesson. This reduces the time available for students to work collaboratively and independently at thinking and solving problems for themselves.

After editing, the sentence read:

Not all students have enough opportunities to think and solve problems for themselves. This affects the rate at which some students can demonstrate their understanding.

The first version of the Ofsted report for Perryfields High School Specialist Maths and Computing College (requires improvement, 3.12.2013) included the following sentence:

In less effective lessons, students were not given enough opportunity to work independently and develop their own ideas. This was because teachers talked too much and too little time was made available for students to work on planned activities.

After editing, the sentence read:

In less effective lessons, students were not given enough opportunity to work without adult help on developing their own ideas. This was because teachers allowed too little time for students to work on planned activities.

Such examples of post-publication changes to the language of Ofsted reports are deeply concerning. In addition, many teachers observed that between January and March 2014 the gap between inspection and publication of reports lengthened considerably, suggesting that Ofsted and the independent service providers were redrafting a considerable number of reports at the pre-publication stage. This suggests that any change in the nature of written Ofsted reports is shallow, and inspectors are still making judgements about the quality of teaching in schools

based upon their own child-centred preferences. If such prejudices affected the grade awarded for the 'quality of teaching' at these schools, then it would follow that these schools should be re-inspected so that not only the wording, but also the final grade, could be revised.

ii. Verbal Feedback

Inspection feedback is not solely contained in the written report: verbal feedback given to senior leaders and to individual teachers can also have a significant effect on future practice. Some respondents to the call for evidence reported that, since January 2014, inspectors had made it very clear from the outset of the inspection that there was now no preferred style of teaching for which Ofsted were looking. However, other respondents reported that the preferred Ofsted style of teaching remained evident in the verbal feedback they received.

In the call for evidence, I asked teachers whose schools have been inspected since January: 'Were particular teaching styles criticised or praised in your verbal feedback? If your answer is yes, please give details.' Here is a selection of the anonymous responses:

- *Yes. In my own observation I was praised for having students teaching each other rather than me teaching from the front. Again stark contrast to their own guidelines.*
- *Too much teacher talk is often verbally mentioned in feedback but due to new criteria, not written down.*
- *Pupils too passive. Not enough engagement... Though every pupil was working in silence on the task in hand...*
- *Yes. I was told children were too passive*
- *Yes, it was clear from the feedback given to senior leadership and to teachers that particular styles were favoured with feedback such as 'should have used group work' and 'there needed to be a reduction in teacher talk so that students could learn independently'.*
- *Yes. Pupils 'just sat there listened to the teacher'.*
- *Staff told Thursday evening (at parents evening) by slt members and headteacher that ofsted had said they wanted more evidence of student led*

learning which to me indicates a preferred teaching style and suggests that 'chalk and talk' doesn't cut ofsted mustard.

iii. Cut-and-paste report writing

The most troubling finding from the 2014 sample of reports was a case of two reports, written by the same lead inspector with just over a month between them, in which sixteen identical or near-identical passages were repeated. Such 'cut-and-paste' report writing within Ofsted has been spotted before, in 2010 and 2012, and is understandably taken very seriously. When judgements, which are agonised over by teachers, governors and senior staff alike, purport to be individualised observations about a particular school but turn out to be generic 'cut-and-paste' passages, it does a great injustice to the school.³³

Coppice Performing Arts School in Wolverhampton was graded 'requires improvement' after an inspection on 22 January 2014, and Beechwood School in Slough was graded 'requires improvement' by the same Lead Inspector one month later on 27 February 2014. Revealingly, the reports contained the following two passages:

Coppice Performing Arts School	Beechwood School
Students who talked to inspectors said that they learn best when they are able to discuss, question and apply what they have come across in their lessons to new, real-life problems and situations drawn from examples around the world.	Students who talked to inspectors said that they learn best when they can discuss, question and apply what they have come across in their lessons to new problems and situations drawn from examples around the world.

Either there was a remarkable similarity in opinion from the pupils consulted in two different parts of the country, or the inspector simply put his own preference for child-centred teaching (class discussions, pupils questioning and applying what they learn) into the mouths of the pupils at the schools. Whilst inspecting Selston High School in Nottingham (good, 5.2.2014) in early February, the same Lead Inspector again heard a similar sentiment from pupils: 'Students say they value the chance to try out new things and work on real-life problems together as it helps them learn, encourages them to support each other and helps them to develop their social skills.'

Other such 'cut-and-paste' judgements from this Lead Inspector's reports included the following phrases:

Coppice Performing Arts School	Beechwood School
<p>Too many inconsistencies remain across different subjects and year groups. Information held on students is not always used well enough to make sure that the work they get, including homework, is at the right level. This is particularly true for the most-able groups of students, who sometimes go unchallenged and, as a result, do not achieve their best.</p>	<p>Too many inconsistencies remain across different subjects and year groups. Information held on students is not always used well enough to make sure that the work they get, including homework, is at the right level. This is particularly true for the most able students, who sometimes go unchallenged and, as a result, do not achieve their best.</p>
<p>Students appreciate the commitment of teachers in supporting their learning outside the classroom, through additional study and support programmes before, during and after school.</p>	<p>Students appreciate the commitment of their teachers in supporting their learning both inside and outside the classroom, through additional study and support programmes before, during and after school.</p>
<p>The greatest improvement to teaching has been in English, where some is now outstanding. This has had an impact on achievement, so more students are making good progress than at the time of the previous inspection.</p>	<p>The greatest improvement to teaching has been in English, where some is now outstanding. This has had a positive impact on achievement, so more students are making good progress than at the time of the previous inspection.</p>
<p>Sixth form students act as good role models and set a good example to their younger peers. They adopt good attitudes towards their work, although some have yet to acquire the skills needed to manage their own time</p>	<p>Sixth form students act as good role models and set a good example to their younger peers. They adopt good attitudes towards their work, although some have yet to acquire the skills needed to manage their own time</p>

effectively.	effectively.
The school promotes equality of opportunity, positive relationships and ensures that discrimination of any type is not tolerated.	The school promotes equality of opportunity, positive relationships and ensures that discrimination of any type is not tolerated.

For a full list of similar or identical judgements, see [Appendix 3](#) online.

iv. Swapping old terms for new

Even though certain words and phrases have disappeared from written Ofsted reports, it struck me that judgements in favour of child-centred approaches were still being made, but expressed using more anodyne terms. This suspicion was confirmed during the call for evidence when I was informed that Ofsted inspectors have been given a list of 'banned phrases', and suggested alternatives, to prevent further accusations of there being a preferred Ofsted style of teaching. This list of 'banned phrases' was circulated by the independent service providers as a guide for lead inspectors. In May 2014, Serco circulated the following guidance:

There must be no writing which implies a particular style of teaching. Ofsted does not expect to see the following phrases:

- work is not matched precisely enough to the needs of individual children
- children do not have enough opportunities to be engaged in independent learning
- pupils are involved in their own learning
- teacher talk dominates too many lessons
- opportunities were missed to extend pupils' learning
- the teacher is slow to move children into a wide range of activities
- ensure pupils have regular opportunities to respond to their teacher's marking in order to make improvement
- in the best lessons, children were given a variety of tasks and there were regular checks of their learning
- teaching requires improvement because children do not make enough progress

- boys lose some focus in their learning if tasks are a little easy or the pace of learning is slow, particularly in long teacher introductions.

Suggested alternatives were then offered for some of the above phrases. So, instead of writing 'Not enough opportunities to engage in independent learning', it was suggested that inspectors could write:

- Pupils do not know what to do when they get stuck because
- Pupils are/ are not able to find information for themselves – for example –
- There are useful prompts displayed in the classroom that help pupils when they get stuck

Instead of writing, 'Too much teacher talk dominates', it was suggested that inspectors could write:

- Explanations are not clear - link to subject knowledge
- The teacher does give pupils enough time to practise new skills [*sic*]

This guidance suggests that a merely cosmetic approach to combatting the Ofsted style is being taken by the service providers, which relies on changing the language of the reports, but allowing the fundamental judgement to remain the same. So, once ubiquitous terms such as 'independent learning' are now noticeably absent, but substitute terms such as 'working things out for themselves', 'take an active part in lessons', and 'problems-solving skills' are finding their way in. For example:

- 'Students are regularly set work which challenges them to think for themselves.' Brentwood County High School (good, 15.1.2013).
- 'Students often take an active part in lessons.' West Exe Technology College (good, 16.1.2014).
- 'Make teaching consistently good or better by ensuring that all teachers... help pupils to extend their skills and understanding through activities to develop their problem-solving and research skills.' Bacton Community Middle School (requires improvement, 5.2.2014).

- ‘Teachers do not provide activities which allow pupils to develop a range of skills by being creative or working things out for themselves.’ Howard Middle School (requires improvement, 25.2.2014)
- ‘In some lessons, carefully planned group challenges made sure that students enjoyed working together without direct adult input, and came up with original and creative ideas.’ Selston High School (good, 5.2.2014)

Although a change in language is evident in more recent reports, this is far from indicating a real culture change within the inspectorate.

Old Andrew’s teaching blog, ‘Scenes From the Battleground’, has become something of a lightning rod over the last year for debates concerning Ofsted. This anonymous comment which was left on 5 April 2014 is a worrying indication of how far Wilshaw’s message is from being heard in the nation’s classrooms:

We’ve had Ofsted in twice this year and the DfE. Additionally, we have an adviser appointed by the academy chain who is also a lead inspector and receives a ludicrous amount of money in order to try to impose ‘what Ofsted want to see’. He’s quite open about it and also very insistent that listening to Wilshaw is tantamount to professional negligence... in that it’s almost certain to land you in a category. I really don’t want to get into a debate about the existence of ‘a preferred teaching style’; there is no debate.³⁴

If inspectors continue to make judgements based on their preference for child-centred teaching methods, whilst hiding such a judgement in the written report, we could enter a dangerous new situation. Schools that trust Wilshaw’s reassurance may feel sufficiently brave to abandon the preferred Ofsted style of teaching, but still be penalised for doing so when an inspector calls.

The Reach of Ofsted

Consequences of Ofsted grading

Although schools can be inspected as infrequently as once every five years, one should not underestimate the ongoing impact that the spectre of Ofsted can exert over a school.

An Ofsted grading is the most significant external validation that a maintained school can receive, and their judgements carry a great deal of weight in winning the approval of local parents—as the tendency for schools to emblazon their ‘outstanding’ ratings on banners attached to the school gates testifies.

In addition, being graded ‘inadequate’ can have a number of negative consequences for a school:

- It will be placed in ‘special measures’ causing ongoing visits from inspectors.
- A letter has to be sent to parents explaining the school improvement plan.
- Members of the senior leadership team or governance body may lose their job.
- It is no longer allowed to employ newly qualified teachers (NQTs).
- Staff recruitment can become a challenge.
- Budget becomes strained as pupil roll falls.
- A salary premium has to be paid to recruit and retain staff.
- It may be forced to become part of an academy chain or transfer to a different academy chain.
- If it is a free school, it may lose some or all of its original freedoms.

Alternatively, if a school is graded ‘outstanding’, it opens up a number of opportunities:

- It can become a teaching school and go on to run School Centred Initial Teacher Training courses (SCITT).

- The head can become a national leader of education (NLE), and stand for election to the regional Head Teacher Boards which are currently in development.
- School places become more in demand.
- It is exempt from further inspection for up to five years.

It is no surprise, therefore, that teachers are put under pressure from their senior leadership to conform to the perceived view of 'what Ofsted wants to see'. The two most significant vehicles for exerting this pressure are internal performance management observations and continuing professional development (CPD).

Performance management observations: playing the game

The formal observation of teachers by schools became compulsory in 1991, with the national scheme of compulsory teacher appraisal. From 2000, the DfES 'Performance Management Framework' further emphasised the central role that formal classroom observations should play in teacher appraisal. In most schools, these classroom visits have come to take the form of between one hour (the minimum required by the School Teacher's Pay and Conditions Document) and three hours (until recently the union negotiated maximum allowed) of formal observations every year.³⁵

These performance management observations have come to emulate as closely as possible those carried out by Ofsted inspectors. Since the 2005 Education Act, schools have been required to complete their own self-evaluation forms (SEFs), which include a school's evaluation of the quality of their teachers, prior to an Ofsted visit.* It becomes the inspector's role to validate the school's judgement on their own strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, Ofsted has played a significant role in driving this change. This process has incentivised schools to grade their teachers according to the same criteria and pedagogical preferences likely to be held by the Ofsted inspectors charged with validating their own self-assessment. It became generally recognised amongst school leaders that Ofsted inspectors expect to see a file of graded lesson observations to back up the self-evaluation of their teaching staff. Indicative of this, internal performance management

* Since 2012, the use of SEFs has no longer been compulsory, but it is widely thought by schools senior leaders that Ofsted inspectors still expect to see them.

observations within schools almost unanimously use Ofsted's four part grading system (outstanding; good; requires improvement; inadequate).

Performance management observation grids are often designed to emulate supposed Ofsted criteria, so often emphasise qualities such as 'independent learning' or 'collaborative work' as elements of 'outstanding' teaching. For instance, a lesson observation grid provided by the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics (NCETM) for use in schools still states in the 'outstanding teaching' category: 'Work in the class is organised in a way that the children must use skills of independence to succeed'.³⁶

Performance management observations are highly significant for teachers and, due to current reforms, career progression and salary are increasingly dependent on their outcome. Thus, teachers feel even further compelled to conform to the Ofsted-preferred style of teaching. The phrase 'playing the game' has evolved within the staffroom lexicon to describe the frustration of having to teach in an ineffective fashion, simply to deliver an 'Ofsted-style' lesson. This frustration has been recorded at length on the *Guardian's* Teacher Network site and in the *Guardian's* anonymous 'Secret Teacher' column. One secret teacher in August 2013 showed the process by which the orthodoxies of the Ofsted style had filtered down into a school's internal observation and training:

I also find it irritating that so much stock is placed on a single observation. I've had Ofsted inspectors in my lessons for 10 minutes at a time; hardly representative of how a whole lesson or series of lessons is planned. Having sat through many an inset day presentation on how to ensure an 'outstanding' grade in a lesson, I think I know the drill:

- Always do group work and never ever have the students writing for any length of time as this is boring and therefore 'inadequate'.
- If the teacher talks for more than five minutes at a time, this is boring and therefore 'inadequate'.
- You must demonstrate progress every 10 or so minutes through some sort of questioning or feedback. If an observer walks in, then you should stop the children from working and immediately ask them to tell you what they've learned.³⁷

Another teacher writing for the Guardian Teacher Network in February 2013 took the risk of rearranging their seating plan days before a performance management observation. Due to this, pupils seemed unhappy about working with their new partners and the teacher did not achieve their usual 'outstanding' grade. The teacher recorded:

Maybe I've got it all wrong, but I thought teaching was about doing the right thing for my students... I do wonder how many teachers there are out there (who are maybe wiser than me) who wouldn't have made the change and as they say 'played the game' so that they get judged 'outstanding'.³⁸

In another article for the Guardian Teacher Network in July 2013, a teacher summarised why performance management observations have come to emulate Ofsted's perceived preferences and criteria. They observed that senior staff expect teachers to plan elaborate, complex and entirely unrepresentative lessons for their performance management. Why?

We judge like this in schools because this is how schools are judged. Or it's how we think they're judged. Ofsted gives (an increasingly short amount of) notice, teachers cram in hours of planning and produce lessons that in all likelihood don't resemble their normal teaching style. The inspectors are hopefully impressed.³⁹

For those teachers who refuse to 'play the game' the consequences are harmful. In extreme cases, careers can be ruined. A science teacher from a large comprehensive school in the South East who answered the call for evidence explained the effect on his career of holding on to a more didactic style of teaching:

Throughout my fifteen years of teaching, the progressive ideology has come to dominate the profession. It has spread to Ofsted and become the paradigm by which school management teams from heads of departments, their deputies all the way to headteachers assess the competency of teachers. Direct instruction teachers such as myself now face a situation where if we teach using direct instruction for observations we will be graded as requiring improvement and then threatened or placed onto capability proceedings unless we change to progressive methods. Due to promoting direct instruction, I have had to leave middle management despite outstanding results as it was not the school's accepted way to teach.

Continual professional development

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) has been an area of significant focus in the last fifteen years of school reform. In March 2001, the Department for Education and Employment published 'Learning and Teaching: A strategy for professional development', explaining that CPD should be at the heart of school improvement. Ideally, CPD should focus on improving teaching and learning, and the professional needs of individual teachers. However, this is not always the case. As one deputy headteacher told me, 'Continual professional development is primarily directed towards Ofsted hoop-jumping rather than genuine school improvement.'

This was evident in some of the first-hand experiences submitted in the call for evidence. I asked the question: 'Have you been told by senior leaders or CPD providers to teach in a certain style to suit Ofsted? If your answer is yes, please give details.' These are some of the responses:

- *Yes. Although this is delivered in a very 'knowing' way. Our leaders know what is good teaching and they know what gets Ofsted grades. They also know there is a difference and are unhappy with having to play the game. Just like the rest of us.*
- *YES. All of our cpd sessions are linked to ofsted. We now must ensure that if ofsted walk in the room we recap key points to ensure it is visually obvious progress is being made.*
- *Yes- it's often about what ofsted want to see. I don't believe it's always what's best for the pupils.*
- *Yes, guidance constantly given - show progress, show independence.*
- *Yes. CPD training and meetings have been held about limiting teacher talk in lessons. These are also now a feature of internal observations.*
- *Yes! We were told not to talk too long, to keep teacher talk to a minimum e.g. age of child to correspond to length of teacher talk 9 years old meant only 9 minutes teacher talk... Also we had to prepare activity based lessons. The children were not supposed to be passive. They had to be doing something every so often... We were told to differentiate. Children were not allowed to all do one activity.*

- *Yes, to put emphasis on independent learning (I need to stress I work with students with profound learning disabilities!) and self/peer assessment.*
- *Yes, of course. The whole game is geared towards providing a show. Every meeting or course is hijacked by the word OfSTED within 30 seconds.*
- *Yes. Less teacher talk. More group work and independent learning. Lots of scaffolding with children needing to know why and what learning from start and no enquiry type starters to hook learners.*
- *Yes, less teacher talk, show progress every 20 minutes, opportunity must be given for independent or group investigation work. Must show progress every 20 minutes by way of 'pitstop plenaries'.*

Following an inspection, the Ofsted judgement will frequently come to dictate the school's future CPD training and become the focus of performance management observations. This process was explained by a French and Spanish teacher from a small secondary school in the West Midlands. Her school was inspected in December 2013, and graded 'requires improvement'. The inspection recommended that, for the school to improve, '...students are required more often to work independently of the teacher for parts of lessons.' The report also criticised the fact that pupils were 'relying too much on teachers for explanations and directions'.^{*} The consequences of this judgement, according to the teacher, were as follows:

The main feedback I was given when observed was that students were too passive and that there was a lack of enthusiasm from students. Following the inspection, compulsory performance management workshops have been given on the main areas for improvement given by Ofsted such as independent learning.

A history and religious education teacher from a small secondary school in the North East recorded a similar experience. The school was inspected in November and the report contained the following statement: 'In the lessons where teaching was less effective, the pace was too slow because the teacher talked too much.' The teacher told us:

^{*} It should be noted, the inspection report was later taken offline so that such statements could be removed and the report could be republished (see previous chapter).

We were inspected just before the new guidance, and it contained much of the usual stuff about too much teacher talk. This led to whole school CPD, with an inset dedicated to limiting teacher talk, where we watched videos of members of senior staff modelling lessons with a limit on teacher talk. There was also a 'Teaching and Learning' group formed, which outlined what they consider as 'outstanding' for the purposes of performance management observations. Parts of the criteria for 'outstanding' included 'opportunities for student-led learning' and 'limited teacher direction'. I take umbrage with the fact that, as a teacher who favours direct instruction, I know I will never get an outstanding grade in my school performance management.

Many respondents to the call for evidence referred to external organisations, consultants and inspection 'gurus' who are brought in by schools to offer CPD training which prepares teachers for Ofsted observations. A considerable industry has grown up of organisations promising to reveal the magic formula for 'outstanding' teaching in the eyes of Ofsted. Examples of such courses include:

- **Osiris Educational:** The UK's leading independent training provider for teachers, Osiris's 2013-14 brochure *Ofsted/Outstanding* offers 32 different training courses for becoming outstanding in the eyes of Ofsted. The 'Outstanding Teaching Conference 2013' promises to be 'A proven process to improve all teaching by at least one Ofsted level', and includes 'student-led learning' as one of their four 'Ofsted focus areas'. Their 'Outstanding Teaching' course promises to be 90 per cent interactive and show teachers how to 'plan for independence' using something called the 'learning kebab©'. They even offer a course on 'Talkless Teaching', promising that attendees will 'take away highly interactive strategies to: support independent learning; encourage collaborative learning' and learn how to 'build talkless teaching into all lessons'. This course has recently been published as a teacher-guide: *Talk-Less Teaching: Practice, Participation and Progress* (Crown House Publishing, 2014).⁴⁰
- **Dragonfly Training:** One of the UK's leading teacher training providers, Dragonfly Training provides a number of 'Teaching & Learning' courses for internal CPD at schools. Titles for their courses include: 'Using Thinking Skills to Raise Academic Standards'; 'Active Learning in the Classroom'; 'Creating Independent Learners' and 'What Makes a Lesson "Outstanding" instead of "Good"'. The brochure for the latter course has an outline

promising to ‘identify what is and what isn’t required to deliver “Outstanding lessons”’, and bullet points such as ‘Going from dependence to independence’ and ““Sage on the Stage” or “Guide from the Side?””.⁴¹

- **Individual Inspectors:** A story for the *Independent* in March 2013 revealed that many Ofsted inspectors, who were not directly employed by HMI, were selling their services to advise schools on ‘what Ofsted want’. Examples include ‘Weatheroak Inspections’ who advertise ‘full preparation for inspection’ at £800. Their website claimed: ‘The unique dual experiences gained from work both as headteacher and in Ofsted-related roles gives us the edge in advising you of how to manage your inspection.’ Another inspector named Angela Kirk was reported to be charging £500 to give services ‘discussing and evaluating the quality of teaching and learning to agree the judgements using Ofsted criteria’.⁴²

This outside training has evolved in response to a demand within schools for any organisation which can shed light on what style of teaching Ofsted deem ‘outstanding’. Such a demand has been created by Ofsted. Through performance management observations and CPD, the Ofsted style of teaching is promulgated through schools on a term-by-term basis. A whole industry has grown up around the Ofsted style of teaching, and to overturn it will require far more strenuous action than is currently being taken.

An End to Lesson Observations?

Current debate

There is an increasing number of voices in the education debate calling for an end to formal lesson observations, applying both to their key role in Ofsted inspections and their use in performance management. Such calls are based on a strong body of evidence that observations are ineffective, and this report strongly backs such a change.

The validity of lesson observations has been challenged in a recent Policy Exchange report, *Watching the Watchmen*. It refers to the work of Professor Robert Coe of Durham University, who has used the data provided by the Measuring the Effectiveness of Teachers (MET) study in America to estimate the effectiveness of lesson observations as conducted by Ofsted. The MET study has cost over \$50 million and analysed 3,000 volunteer teachers. Coe has projected the MET study findings onto Ofsted observation judgements and demonstrates two important points:

- First, lesson observation judgments do not consistently correspond with future pupil outcomes. Coe simulated figures for the four-part Ofsted inspection grading and showed that in the best case scenario, only 49 per cent of observation grade judgements would agree with future pupil achievement.
- Secondly, where more than one inspector is in the room, the chance of them reaching the same judgement is not guaranteed, showing the practice of lesson observations to be a very imperfect science. Again, Coe has used the American data to simulate a figure for the Ofsted grading system, and suggests that in the best case scenario, two inspectors would agree on their grading 61 per cent of the time. When it came to grading a lesson 'inadequate', two inspectors would agree, in the best case scenario, only 38 per cent of the time.

Thus, the lesson observation grading from an inspector is lacking in both validity and reliability.⁴³

A similar conclusion was reached by a Sutton Trust report last year, entitled *Testing Teachers*, which brought together the MET study evidence and other research projects from Britain and America. The report compared pupil results,

pupil surveys and lesson observations as three methods for assessing teacher effectiveness. Lesson observations proved to be the least effective. As the report stated:

...even when observers were highly trained, independent and calibrated each day, a single classroom observation was a far worse predictor of teacher success compared with value-added test scores or even pupil assessment. This is because an observation is only ever going to be a snapshot of what is going on in a classroom, whereas the other measures come from a culmination of events over the academic year.⁴⁴

The Sutton Trust concludes that classroom observations are an effective means of providing evaluative professional development, but a poor means of giving a summative grade for a teacher's effectiveness. For this reason, teacher appraisal and teacher development observations should not be combined, as they so often are in current school performance management structures. This suggestion is pertinent to Ofsted's current form, as it currently attempts to provide both inspection judgement and professional development simultaneously. The Sutton Trust report suggests that such a combination is bound to attract the hostility of teachers, as they come to resent the judgement, and have little respect for the professional development.

From an international perspective, England has an unusual attachment to lesson observations. The OECD's 2013 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) surveyed 2,500 English teachers from around 150 schools, and found 99 per cent of them received annual feedback on their teaching on the basis of classroom observations. This compared to an OECD average of 79 per cent and an average of 81 per cent from amongst the nine highest performing countries surveyed: Japan, Korea, Singapore, Estonia, Finland, Flanders (Belgium), The Netherlands, Alberta (Canada) and Australia. These high performing countries were more likely than England to use alternative forms of teacher appraisal such as student surveys, parent surveys or assessment of subject knowledge.

More revealing still, not only are teachers in England unusually over-observed, they are also uniquely jaundiced about the impact that appraisal feedback has on their professional practice. TALIS surveyed teachers in 34 countries or economies about whether feedback resulted in a positive change on various aspects of their work or career. Of all 34 nations surveyed, English teachers were the least likely to say that feedback resulted in a moderate or large positive change in four areas:

confidence as a teacher; knowledge and understanding of main subject field(s); motivation; and job satisfaction. The observation culture in English schools is not only ineffective, it is deeply resented.⁴⁵

In defence of Ofsted's use of lesson observations, their Director of Schools Michael Cladingbowl has recently claimed that inspectors do not grade lessons, but instead use lesson observations as one part of their evidence to give an overall grade for teaching over time. Indeed, at his March speech to ASCL, Wilshaw claimed of Ofsted: 'We've stopped giving teachers individual grades.' According to Ofsted, inspectors grade teaching according to lesson observations, but also consider factors such as the quality of pupil work, discussions with parents and pupils, observing classroom routines and so on. This has apparently been the case since 2009, but many teachers could be forgiven for not having realised.⁴⁶ In reality, observations are still being used to grade lessons and teachers.

Cladingbowl's distinction between 'making a judgement about the quality of teaching, based on a wide variety of evidence', and providing 'an overall grade for the quality of each lesson' has little reality on the ground. Inspectors still observe lessons, they still enter a grade for 'quality of teaching' in their evidence form, and many still—in contradiction to Cladingbowl's claims—are prepared to tell a teacher what they 'got'. Teachers have observed that, in verbal feedback, inspectors now make exactly the same judgements as before, but simply add 'over time' to create the impression that a variety of evidence has been considered.

The continued grading of lessons is confirmed by a large degree of first-hand accounts from teachers, particularly on social media. One such testimony was submitted to us by an English and Drama teacher at a school in the West Midlands, who was inspected in May 2014:

The inspector visited the first 25 minutes of my 1 hour Drama lesson. After the lesson, I was learned that the inspector had given feedback to a member of our SLT team. They had also told them the grade for the lesson: requires improvement. The manager then shared this information with me after school. Amongst other things, the inspector criticised me for not displaying an AFL target and not facilitating enough pupil talk and independent learning... Because the style and structure of the lesson is supposedly my choice, I felt strongly that I was being unfairly judged by an inspector who was employing methods which are no longer expected to be used.

More importantly, written Ofsted reports from this year happily state that particular lessons, which they believe worthy of comment, have been assigned particular grades:

- 'In an outstanding year 10 drama lesson...' Cheshunt School (requires improvement, 15.1.2014).
- 'In an outstanding Year 11 history lesson...' West Exe Technology College (good, 16.1.2014).
- 'An outstanding physical education lesson was seen in which...' The Parker E-ACT Academy (inadequate, 28.1.2014).

These judgements clearly contradict the claims made by Cladingbowl and Wilshaw. As recognised by Cladingbowl, one of the problems appears to be that the evidence form used by inspectors includes a box to grade the 'quality of teaching' in a lesson. Often, this grade is then relayed back to the teacher as a lesson observation grade. On 4 June, Cladingbowl made a written announcement stating that this box would be removed from evaluation forms in a pilot project, starting immediately, across the Midlands region. Explaining this decision, Cladingbowl wrote: 'I am still concerned that ineffective and unnecessary lesson observation is going on in too many of our schools.' However, in this pilot project, inspectors will still summarise the overall 'strengths and weaknesses' of the teaching within a school, and assign it a grade. How such a grade will be reached is now even less clear than before.

Therefore, this pilot will not resolve the key problem that what makes 'strong' or 'weak' teaching remains a highly contested subject, and one on which inspectors have shown themselves to have a very distinct viewpoint. In his written announcement, Cladingbowl wrote that inspectors should be ecumenical about 'traditional' or 'progressive' teaching styles, but it is clear from my research that, considering the existing body of inspectors, such open-mindedness is easy to request but difficult to achieve. Cladingbowl ended his announcement with a passage requesting that inspectors broaden their scope of what can be judged as 'good practice'.

I also want the range of comments made about teaching by inspectors and by those in schools to widen. Like others, I don't favour individual lesson check-lists that are aligned to specific behaviours. This does little to

encourage good teachers or increase professional reflection on what is effective practice.

Of course, inspectors and schools do focus on many of the right things when they look at teaching – for example is the work hard enough and do the children work hard at it? But comment on teaching is often focused on the same issues – the length of the introduction, the activities set, the match to the needs of children, the quality of questioning and comment on the marking of books. In some instances, it can focus on explaining why the grade was awarded rather than adding fresh insight.

What about teachers' subject knowledge, the children's sense of routine, the ability to turn direction mid-sentence, a common sense approach to differentiation, the sense of humour, the infectiousness of the explanation? I see too little of this kind of comment about teaching. I hope we see more reporting of it during the pilot.

Hope is a wonderful thing. This passage merely shows how impossible it is to codify what makes good teaching for the sake of fair and consistent Ofsted judgements. In order to grade the 'quality of teaching' within a school, Ofsted either has to prescribe what constitutes good practice to ensure consistency, or leave schools at the mercy of the whims and preferences of the individual inspectors. Neither situation is satisfactory.

What is good practice?

Quite aside from questions surrounding the Ofsted 'style' of teaching, recent Ofsted reports praise a largely arbitrary collection of teaching practices. Taken together, the features, methods and practices that Ofsted inspectors deem worthy of praise do not amount to any general consensus on 'good practice'. As a result, teachers and schools are left playing the highly stressful game of second guessing the likes and dislikes of their individual inspector.

Most teachers would agree that thorough planning, regular assessment and good subject knowledge are all features of high-quality teaching. However, any advance on such features enters a contentious debate, and there is little reason to expect that Ofsted inspectors embody some consensual middle ground on the issue. My research into the 2014 sample of 130 inspection reports shows inspectors singling out an arbitrary selection of features as good practice:

- i. **Non-academic outcomes:** One of the most common features that inspectors seem to be looking for in lessons is a focus on non-academic outcomes, normally expressed as 'spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils'. Schools no doubt play an important role in shaping such 'development', but the idea that lesson time should be given over to such aims is not widely agreed. However, Ofsted reports repeatedly praise teaching where non-academic outcomes are focused upon. The report for James Calvert Spence College, (requires improvement, 4.2.2014), claimed that 'students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted well', singling out a Year 11 English literature lesson where, whilst studying *Of Mice and Men*, 'students were encouraged to reflect on sexism and equality issues.' Similarly, in the inspection report for Heathcote School and Science College (good, 28.1.2014), the inspector wrote: 'In a highly successful Year 9 English lesson on writing a film review... [t]he analysis of the film created good opportunities for students' spiritual, moral and cultural development.' In the inspection report for Shenley Academy (good, 5.2.2014), it was recorded that in religious education and geography lessons, students discussed topics 'such as sacrifice and dementia which contributes well to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development'.
- ii. **Relevance:** Another practice for which inspectors appear to show an undue preference is making lessons 'relevant' to the life experiences of pupils. Again, this is a contested issue, and not something universally accepted as 'good practice' within the profession. It is generally seen as a facet of child-centred education that pupils will be more likely to learn if the content is related to their immediate life experiences. At Archbishop Sentamu Academy (good, 5.2.2014), it was observed that the school would be able to 'increase the portion of students making more than expected progress in mathematics by the end of Year 11' by, 'providing more opportunities for students to apply mathematical skills in real-life scenarios.' Similarly, 'inadequate' lessons at Thorns Community College (requires improvement, 27.2.2014) were criticised for 'lacking relevance to the students' experience'.

- iii. **Teaching to the test:** There is a developing tendency in the 2014 sample of Ofsted reports to praise 'teaching to the test' as evidence of 'good practice'. In addition, some inspectors confuse knowledge of examination criteria with subject knowledge – a depressing indication of the sacrifice of real learning to exam requirements. In the report for Cheshunt School (requires improvement, 15.1.2014), an 'outstanding' year 10 drama lesson was described in which 'students worked very effectively in pairs interpreting examination criteria'. In the report for King Edward VI School (good, 6.3.2014), teachers were praised for having a 'good subject knowledge, high expectations and a thorough awareness of examination requirements'. Similarly, the report for Heathcote School and Science College singled out teaching to the test for praise at sixth form level: 'Teachers have a secure knowledge of their subjects and of the expectations of the AS- and A-level examinations. As a result, they give students the knowledge and skills to be able to tackle examinations successfully.'

Other examples of praise and criticism in the 2014 sample seem even more odd. At Poynton High School (requires improvement, 21.1.2014) teachers were criticised for 'excessive use of textbooks', particularly in physics lessons. At the Da Vinci Studio School (good, 28.1.2014), it was reported that the school 'is not yet an outstanding school' because, 'students do not read widely enough outside of the classroom' – an admirable but unusual requirement. Heartlands Academy (outstanding, 5.2.2014) was told that 'to improve further' they should ensure that pupils 'regularly use and apply their thinking skills', even though the very existence of discrete 'thinking skills' is a contested subject amongst educationists. Additionally, many inspection reports state that lessons need to involve more writing, whilst a similar number state lessons require more discussion. With inspectors only observing lessons for twenty minutes, it is difficult for a teacher to know which of the two activities would best be pursued.

In addition, even within clearly defined terms of 'good practice', there remains enormous scope for subjective judgement on the part of the individual inspector. This was evident in the inspection report for George Salter Academy (good, 22.1.2014), which praised 'outstanding' teaching in which teachers used 'excellent subject knowledge', and pupils could 'think deeply' and 'reflect on the quality of their work'. The example proffered as elaboration read:

This was seen in a Year 7 music lesson, in which a group of talented musicians were able to develop and improve their individual parts, and go [on] to give a high quality performance of ABBA's 'Dancing Queen'.

Perhaps the most egregious case of inspector subjectivity that I encountered in my call for evidence came from a deputy headteacher at a recently inspected secondary school in north-east London. He and his team had worked hard to turn around behaviour at the school, only to find that pupils were 'too compliant' for the inspector's liking:

Behaviour was recognised as a strength of the school, reinforced by pupils who said it was 'too strict, but we know that's for our own good'. When looking at the criteria for outstanding behaviour, one inspector suggested the pupils were 'too compliant'. It was explained that this is because they do as they're told rather than manage their own behaviour.

When reading through a large sample of Ofsted reports, it is notable how few ever pass judgement on the delivery, or choice, of specific subject content. This is unsurprising, as lessons are frequently observed by non-subject specialists, or even inspectors with experience of a different stage of school (for example former secondary school teachers inspecting primary schools). This lack of subject expertise may help to explain why inspections are overwhelmingly concerned with pedagogy, as opposed to the actual curriculum content of a lesson.

In addition, the design of twenty minute snapshot inspections prejudices inspectors towards 'child-centred' teaching methods, such as group work, active learning or role play, as they have a performative nature which makes them far more immediately impressive to a visitor. In comparison with more teacher-led activities such as note-taking, listening to an explanation or completing written work, child-centred methods are more impactful for the passing inspector.

For example, the report for Marden Bridge Middle School (requires improvement, 5.3.2014) stated that: 'Pupils enjoy learning because fast-paced, exciting activities and challenging tasks engage their interest and they become absorbed in their work', giving the example of a classroom debate concerning cutting down an oak tree to expand their playground. Similarly, at the Henry Court Community College (good, 27.2.2014) it was observed that: 'Where teaching was outstanding, students are actively encouraged to be proactive in thinking for themselves and to guide their own learning.' It is all too easy for this visual impact of excitement in the

classroom – or ‘buzz’ as it is commonly termed – to be confused for a superior approach to classroom teaching.

De-professionalisation

There is little wonder that schools and teachers find anticipating the whims of individual Ofsted inspectors a stressful experience. The randomness of what Ofsted deems to be good practice lends credence to the verdict, established by Professor Coe, that Ofsted lesson observations are not the exact science which they aspire to be. Therefore, the confidence with which inspectors and senior leaders will assert that a lesson is, for example, ‘good with elements of outstanding in assessment techniques’, can be extremely de-professionalising for classroom teachers.

This frustration was expressed by one of the responses to the call for evidence, an English teacher from a sixth form college in north-east London:

Previous generations have purported to use signs to discern witchcraft and witches, or bumps on the head to discern criminality or intelligence. The fact that we would like to judge the quality of teaching doesn't mean that we can or that we should pretend we can... The consequence is that comments are made which are misleading, unjust and corrosive of education... When trainee inspectors (i.e highly experienced educationalists) vary in their judgement of a lesson so much that they range from inadequate to outstanding this suggests that that their judgements are so imperfect as to be of very little value. Yet despite this they make authoritative sounding comments with a tone of certainty that is misleading to the point of lying... Ofsted's resources should be focused upon rooting out incompetence, as this is where the inspectorate has the greatest benefit. To aim to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ is a fool's errand.

What Ofsted inspectors criticise and praise is invariably based on personal preference. Schools and teachers should have the freedom to accept or reject certain teaching methods at their choosing and not feel forced to conform to them by the inspectorate. Results, not inspector prejudice, can bear out whether or not they qualify as ‘good practice’.

Recommendations

The judgement of individual inspectors on the quality of teaching within a school is too subjective, too imprecise and too contentious to continue in its current form. The practice of lesson observations has been shown to be an inexact science, with judgements that are both invalid and inconsistent. This is compounded by the negative effect of observations, distracting teachers from honest questions about what will help pupils learn, and towards the more cynical question of ‘what does Ofsted want to see?’

Therefore, I recommend the following changes:

- The ‘quality of teaching’ category should be removed from Section 5 Ofsted reports.*
- Formal lesson observations should no longer be carried out by Ofsted inspectors.
- Ofsted should cease to publish ‘best practice’ guidance on teaching for schools.
- Ofsted should make it clear that they do not necessarily expect internal performance management in schools to be based upon graded lesson observations.
- The ‘behaviour and safety’ category in Section 5 Ofsted reports should never be used to make judgements about teaching methods.
- A year-long Ofsted inspection moratorium for all schools before these changes, and the move to a ‘two-tier’ inspection process, take place. This would not include schools in special measures, experiencing a rapid decline in examination results, or subject to whistle-blower concerns.

It is important to emphasise that the removal of the ‘quality of teaching’ category would not stop inspectors from entering the classroom during an inspection, or turn Ofsted inspections into a data check that could be carried out from a computer. As

* Such a change may require primary legislation, as the current framework which requires that schools are inspected according to four categories was introduced by the 2011 Education Act.

the recent Trojan Horse affair has demonstrated, the inspectorate must remain responsible for responding to whistle-blowers and inspecting the environment in which pupils are educated—something that a simple examination of data cannot provide. Witnessing classroom routines, pupil conduct, quality of work, progress in books and school ethos would remain vital to the inspection process, in order to inform the remaining three categories ('achievement of pupils', 'behaviour and safety' and 'leadership and management'). However, such evidence would not inform any discrete judgement on the 'quality of teaching'.

There is an inconsistency in Ofsted's current approach. If Ofsted does not have a preferred teaching methodology, how can it judge the quality of teaching? If, as is often claimed, the quality of teaching is judged by pupil outcomes, then surely this is adequately covered by the 'achievement of pupils' grade, making a 'quality of teaching' grade superfluous. Classroom teaching and pupil achievement are two sides of the same coin, and one category is all that is needed to cover both aspects of school life.

The fact that 'quality of teaching' inherently defers to 'achievement of pupils' is even evident in the most recent Ofsted inspection guidance, which states: 'The most important role of teaching is to promote learning and to raise pupils' achievement.'⁴⁷ More revealing still, recent analysis of Ofsted reports confirms that in 97 per cent of inspections, the 'quality of teaching' grade is the same as the 'achievement of pupils' grade. Former Michael Gove aide Sam Freedman, who now works for Teach First, commented on this in the *Times Educational Supplement*. He asked, 'for that 3 per cent where there is a difference, is it worth the upheaval it causes within schools, the misery it causes for individual teachers when they get their teaching graded as a 3 or 4? I don't think so.'⁴⁸ This statistic begs the question, why should the 'quality of teaching' be assessed if the eventual judgement almost always duplicates the judgement for 'achievement of pupils'?

It is commonly observed by heads that Ofsted inspectors will arrive at a school intending to seek out teaching which will validate their pre-existing understanding of pupil achievement. If a procedure such as lesson observations, so widely acknowledged to be contentious and stressful, has so little impact on a school's overall grade, there can be little reason for it to continue.

The removal of the 'quality of teaching' category from Ofsted reports, and the end of formal lesson observations, would have a number of positive consequences:

- It would be the surest way of ensuring that, in Wilshaw's words, inspectors only comment on the 'outcomes of teaching rather than its style'.
- It would dispel any lingering impression in schools that Ofsted favours a particular style of teaching.
- It would encourage schools to use their new-found freedoms to innovate in their teaching methods and curriculum, without fear of being penalised for not conforming to the Ofsted style of teaching.
- It would encourage schools to develop more productive forms of performance management such as pupil surveys and examination results, rather than aping the current Ofsted process with intermittent graded lesson observations.
- It would allow school CPD to focus on ensuring that their pupils learn and achieve, and not on pleasing Ofsted. As was often expressed in the call for evidence, these aims are too often at variance with each other.
- It would allow internal lesson observations to return to a more evaluative practice, focused upon professional development, rather than their current summative, graded form.

It could be argued that without a grade for the 'quality of teaching', an overdependence on grading schools according to 'achievement of pupils', would be created. As this grade is based largely upon external examination results, schools and teachers may be further encouraged to pursue perverse incentives.

Under the current performance indicators popularly used by Ofsted inspectors, such as five A* to C at GCSE including English and maths, the Ofsted Data Dashboard, and the achievement gap between pupil premium pupils and their peers, this is a valid concern. However, reforms which are currently underway to create more credible performance indicators should waylay such fears. From the academic year 2015/16, the four main performance indicators for schools will be progress from key stage 2 across eight subjects (Progress 8), attainment across eight subjects (Attainment 8), the EBacc, and the percentage of pupils achieving a C grade or better in English and maths. Destination measures for departing pupils may also be used. These indicators should overcome the damaging focus on the C/D borderline in a narrow range of subjects and encourage schools to raise attainment amongst all pupils, across the ability levels and in a broad range of

subjects. In addition, if coupled with significantly better training of Ofsted inspectors in data analysis, these performance indicators will make reaching the 'achievement of pupils' grade a more objective and less controversial procedure.⁴⁹

The Ofsted of the future needs to be concerned first and foremost with school accountability and not professional development. Their drift towards professional development in recent years has blurred the lines on their purpose as an organisation and exacerbated the impression that there is a particular Ofsted style of teaching. Ofsted should be overwhelmingly concerned with finding and combatting failure, not trying to discern the exact strengths and weaknesses within each and every school.

There are encouraging signs that Ofsted will retreat from its current expanse. In March, Wilshaw suggested that good schools will no longer experience full inspections, but instead regular 'light touch' visits by a single HMI. Full inspections would only be triggered when examination results or whistle-blowers show concerns. Such a reform should prompt a debate over whether the four-part grading system, which categorises schools as 'outstanding', 'good', 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate', should remain. A two-tier inspection system whereby schools either experience 'light touch' or full inspections would perhaps lend itself better to a pass/fail grading system, and Ofsted could become—in an increasingly popular analogy—more of a hygiene inspector than a food critic.

Were such a step to be taken, then politicians would also have to wean themselves off the habit of deferring to Ofsted inspection grades to assess the success of different government reforms, such as the free schools and academies policies, and the habit of using Ofsted grading as an accreditation for new initiatives, such as becoming a teaching school. In addition, Ofsted are currently charged with inspecting the take-up of government initiatives such as performance related pay. This current practice greatly enhances the power and reach of the inspectorate beyond a simple accountability body. The government should consider whether privileges such as becoming a teaching school, or a multi-academy trust, should depend upon a school's Ofsted grading, or a separate accreditation process.

There are, of course, other problems and criticisms concerning Ofsted aside from its institutional preference for certain styles of teaching. Notably, inspectors need to have better training in data analysis. There seem to be too many inconsistencies and peculiarities in the way in which the 'achievement of pupils' grade is currently reached. Many who responded to the call for evidence complained of the

disproportionate weight given, for example, to closing the gap between pupil premium pupils and the rest of their peers, and it seems that many otherwise good schools are penalised for falling short on this particular measure.

In addition, free schools pose a problem for data-driven inspections, as such schools (unless converting from the independent sector) do not have externally marked examinations when they are first inspected. This is true for the first five years in the case of secondary schools. Coupled with the removal of national curriculum levels, this means that 'data-driven' short inspections are not easy to carry out when a 'pupil achievement' can only be gleaned from internal assessment. A new inspection process could be developed specifically for free schools during their early years which takes into account their lack of external data from national tests.

However, for the time being, the most pressing concern for classroom teachers remains the continued existence of a preferred Ofsted style of teaching. Measures taken so far have failed to curb the influence of this orthodoxy, and the profession is far from being reassured that they are now free to teach how they like irrespective of the preferences of the inspectorate. Wilshaw has publicly stated that this 'Ofsted style' of teaching is a thing of the past, but this will not be the case whilst the 'quality of teaching' grade remains. For this to happen, far more robust action is required.

Appendices

For those interested in the evidence gathered for this report, charts detailing a full breakdown of the appearance of the six 'indicators' of a preferred Ofsted teaching style in 260 inspection reports are available online.

Appendix 1: 2013 sample

<http://www.civitas.org.uk/pdf/playingthegameappendix1.pdf>

Appendix 2: 2014 sample

<http://www.civitas.org.uk/pdf/playingthegameappendix2.pdf>

Appendix 3: Comparison of judgements made in inspection reports for Coppice Performing Arts School and Beechwood School

<http://www.civitas.org.uk/pdf/playingthegameappendix3.pdf>

Notes

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