

Closer inspection of schools and teachers

Tristram Hunt (Comment, 13 March) is right that "school inspections must be free of political meddling", that Michael Gove's policy of "forced academisation" is disastrous, and that "we need to disaggregate curriculum from qualifications; question the breadth of provision; and highlight the broader function of schooling in building character and resilience in young people".

He is also right in his critique of Ofsted - but doesn't go far enough. Over the years it has often been a ruthless enforcer of government policies with a narrow vision of education that has ignored local circumstances; for many teachers its inspectors are fear-inducing and unsupportive; for headteachers an adverse report may cost their job; and overall it seems to promote a bullying culture in school staffrooms which would not be tolerated in playgrounds. It is time to close down Ofsted - and save £70m of the national schools budget.

Schools aren't factories and don't need tick-box inspection: to raise their profile they need dialogue with experienced fellow professionals. That can come from local authority inspectors who understand local problems, from colleagues in neighbouring schools on the basis of school self-evaluation, and from teacher-trainers at the local university. Schools improve from the inside - through collegial discussion of staff, drawing on views of parents, community support, local governors and fellow educators - not from the outside in the form of quick in-and-out visits by Ofsted inspectors.

Professor Michael Bassey
Newark, Nottinghamshire

Tristram Hunt's confirmation that, as secretary of state, he would guarantee the independence of Ofsted and ensure that all schools funded by the taxpayer are open to inspection is welcome. So too is his recognition that there is far more to a good education than can be

recorded in tickable boxes. It is now time for him to ask himself whether England should remain the only country in Europe to attempt to manage thousands of schools by means of contracts with an individual government minister. Academy "freedoms" are important but can perfectly well be secured by other means. Contracts are proving unenforceable and ludicrously inefficient.

Peter Newsam
Thornton Dale, North Yorkshire

Some of the suggestions made by the Policy Exchange review about the inspection of schools are helpful, but overall they are dangerous to the future of our children and our country (Ofsted needs shorter inspections and better use of data - thinktank, 17 March). Yes, more frequent visits by better-qualified inspectors could be valuable, as would a shift of emphasis towards helping schools to improve their performances - both to make what is being done more effective and to respond to changes in the world in which we live.

However, to rely on test results to judge schools and decide whether and how they should change would be disastrous. Already there is far too little time observing teaching and talking with teachers and children. I know of a six-class school judged on the basis of six lessons being seen. Test results are never perfect. By 13 years of age it was shown that 10% of children were misplaced under the old 11-plus system, and the percentage rose with age. The tests given today are also far too narrow to provide an adequate picture of a school's performance. Our children need a broadly based education that will enable them to take a positive part in the world about them.

Children's education needs to proceed from where they are, and so does the development of a school.

Professor Norman Thomas
(Former HMI), St Albans, Hertfordshire

The Policy Exchange report on inspection makes many good points but fails to get at the heart of the inspection process. Evaluating a school without observing work in class is akin to reviewing a play or a concert without having seen it performed. It can be done, it probably has been done, but it should not be done.

Professor Colin Richards
(Former HMI), Spark Bridge, Cumbria

The Kent LEA "Protocol for what happens to a headteacher if/when their school receives a poor Ofsted report" (Headteachers face up to the prospect of being 'disappeared', 11 March) should be no surprise. Many headteachers have had their careers tarnished, or wrecked, by the implementation of Ofsted's approach. In turn this "zero-tolerance" approach is replicated by local authorities and central government, who fear being seen as weak in their management of schools. Fear and intolerance permeate the system.

The paradox here is that we fetter and honour successful headteachers. In psychological language, there is a powerful split at work here, based on our own experiences of having once been school-children ourselves. On the one hand we idealise headteachers (and teachers

generally) who are perceived as "good", but we cannot bear the idea of "failing" school leaders or schools. Our politicians and Ofsted have played into this simplistic formula for too long.

It seems Ofsted may slowly be realising that for schools they approve of, the threat of public exposure and professional punishment for "failure" is not the answer. It is not the answer for schools which are struggling, either.

Dr Phil Goss
(Former headteacher), Kirkby Lonsdale

Teachers are leading the transformation of English education, and your misleading article (Inside the A* factory, Weekend, 15 March) undermines their enormous efforts. We have given teachers more freedom: the new national curriculum states what children need to know, rather than telling teachers how to teach, and Ofsted has made it clear it will focus on whether children are learning, rather than interfering in how teachers teach. That makes teachers more important. Thanks to them, 250,000 fewer children are in failing secondary schools, while we have the highest-ever number doing subjects like chemistry and physics.

Your article also described a "demoralised" profession working in an "exam factory". But we have got rid of GCSE modules, and moved to linear A-levels with exams only at the end of the course, hugely reducing the number of tests children sit. Meanwhile we have the best generation of teachers ever. New teachers are half as likely to switch to another career as other graduates. Teach First, which recruits more teachers than ever, is ranked the third-best graduate employer in the country. We have the highest-ever proportion of new teachers with top degrees, and our teachers are paid more, and promoted more quickly, than in most developed countries.

Elizabeth Truss MP
Education minister

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Professor Michael Bassey

