

Commission on School Reform's response to the Scottish Government's Consultation 'School inspections are changing'

Introduction

The current consultation exercise on the inspection process relies almost exclusively on expressions of agreement or disagreement, on a sliding scale, with the existing inspection regime. It leaves almost no scope for comment on why the system should change at all, or what those changes might be. This paper offers a perspective on the problems with HMIe and its inspection regime, and some possible suggestions for improvement. We have tried to ensure that the recommendations for change outlined below have been included in our submission to the consultation. Due to the restrictive nature of the consultation, we have utilised "other comment" boxes where appropriate. As a result, it was not always possible to make the points we wanted to, where we wanted to. The relevant question number and section are noted in brackets.

There are two issues to consider before discussing a new approach to inspection. The first is the purpose of inspection and the second is whether the current system fulfils that purpose. Only if the current system is failing in its purpose, or its purpose is inappropriate, is it necessary to consider changes.

Current purpose of inspection

The current aim of the inspection process is threefold. It is to provide public assurance of the quality of Scottish education and ensure public accountability. It is to promote improvement and encourage innovation in education. And finally, it is to inform the development of educational policy and practice. This is both comprehensive and appropriate.

Current inspection processes

It is not difficult to demonstrate that HMIe processes have failed in all three aspects of its remit. At the most fundamental level, HMIe totally failed to identify the decline in Scottish educational standards. Neither their individual school inspection reports nor their 'state of the nation' summaries identified the issue. At no point has HMIe indicated that literacy and numeracy standards were falling, nor that science education was also in decline. The international Pisa results have offered stark evidence of not only the low standard of current educational outcomes but also the steady and unremitting nature of that decline. What has been clearly obvious to teachers, many parents and employers, completely eluded HMIe.

On a second fundamental level, it has not been HMIe who has drawn attention to the shockingly poor attendance of a significant proportion of the school population, nor to the level of indiscipline in many classrooms, including the high incidence of violence. It is not credible to suggest that a process which has totally failed to identify these serious issues in our schools, issues which are detrimental to the educational prospects of all pupils, not just those who do not attend or behave appropriately, is an effective process.

It has been left to other organisations, such as the Commission for School Reform, and teachers themselves to sound the alarm on both educational standards and the indiscipline and attendance crisis. Indeed, low teacher recruitment in itself is a stronger indicator of problems than inspection reports have provided.

An organisation which has failed so fundamentally is in no position to suggest improvements or innovations in the education system since it clearly has inadequate means of ascertaining success, or the lack of it. Neither can it inform educational policy or practice since it clearly struggles to evaluate current policies or practice. In short, the existing inspection process has lost a great deal of credibility with both the teaching profession and with the public. It is in need of radical change.

What went wrong with the inspection process

At the sharp end of the inspection process, in the schools under inspection, HMIE appeared to be more interested in the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) than in actual outcomes. For example, an individual school curriculum was assessed according to its adherence to CfE guidelines, not its appropriateness for its pupils. Secondary schools which failed to reduce the number of subjects studied at S4 were open to criticism. Yet for many, if not most pupils, fewer subjects was simply not appropriate. HMIE's incorporation into Education Scotland in 2011 changed the tenor of inspections from outcomes based to compliance. The lessons of the 2000 Higher Still examination debacle were completely ignored. When HMIE was heavily involved in the implementation of Higher Still, it refused to acknowledge the serious problems that schools were repeatedly flagging up. Both the Higher Still experience and the current CfE failure indicate strongly that the inspection regime must be independent of educational policy. HMIE should therefore play no role in policy development.

It is a very welcome development that HMIE is once more to operate as an independent agency. Had this been the case during the last fourteen years, the flaws in CfE might have been identified earlier and action taken to ameliorate them. HMIE's commitment to implement CfE, in line with Education Scotland, apparently blinded them, wilfully or not, to its effectiveness, or rather its ineffectiveness, in the classroom.

A lack of intelligent accountability, and no clear evidence of audit processes within HMIE, has resulted in a hierarchy of inspection gradings which appears to be significantly aligned with socio-economic status. It is very clearly not the case that teaching and learning practices in more deprived schools are inferior to the practices in more affluent areas, yet HMIE grades would give that impression. It is both the lack of objective data and the resulting inability to measure individual pupil progress, which preclude objective assessment of school performance, irrespective of socio-economic factors. HMIE has never called for the necessary objective assessment in primary schools or for individual progress measures to be introduced. Nor have they analysed their own gradings to assure the public that socio-economic status is not influencing them.

Particularly in primary schools, the lack of reliable assessment data results in impressionistic judgements, euphemistically referred to as 'holistic'. In secondary schools the picture is the same until the end of S4. If genuine progress data were available, as with the Progress8 data in England, the inspection of individual schools might be rendered virtually redundant although thematic inspections could still provide useful information regarding developments across the country. In short, the current inspection regime offers a subjective proxy for the genuine accountability that only reliable data, intelligently analysed, can provide.

HMIe has collaborated in the advancement of teaching and learning strategies which have not only been unhelpful in the educational process but, in some cases, positively detrimental. There is now a widespread consensus, based on international outcomes, that a knowledge based curriculum, including a renewed emphasis on the retention of knowledge, is the most effective approach to education. Yet HMIe has never identified, or has never reported, the problems with a skills based approach, nor has it advocated a knowledge based curriculum. HMIe should stand above trends and shibboleths, to concentrate on evidence based research and actual outcomes.

The How Good is Our School documentation has attained almost mythic status. It is alarmingly complex, there are over 140 challenge questions for example, and has become a burden on schools rather than a tool for improvement. As one inspector once commented, if it isn't written in a school policy document then it isn't happening. This emphasis on documentation over action is misplaced. Inspection documentation should be simpler and focused on schools' practice and outcomes rather than policy documents.

The credibility of HMIe relies on its clear adherence to evidence and outcomes, not adherence to current fashionable practices, and on its ability to identify both good practice and problematic issues as they arise.

Suggestions for change

1 HMIe should now remain independent of both the curriculum and qualifications agencies. Their evaluations and reports must be based on evaluation of progress and outcomes, and not on compliance with guidelines which may or may not be evidence based. Guidelines are just that; they should not be regarded as mandatory. In schools, what is mandatory is to achieve the best outcomes for pupils, and teachers have the professional responsibility to determine the best way to achieve this. For HMIe reports to retain credibility with teachers and the public, they must reflect the true reality of schools. (6.3 School Inspection Frameworks)

2 The number of permanent inspectors should be reduced and the number of seconded inspectors increased. Removal from the everyday reality of classrooms and schools warps the perception of what may appear to be a viable strategy versus what actually achieves a positive outcome. Inspectors need current experience of today's young people and the realities of current classroom life. The existing balance between those inspectors with recent classroom experience and those with inspectorial expertise should be amended in favour of

classroom experience. The use of lay inspectors is questionable and should be retained only if there is evidence of positive impact. (2.3 Frequency of school inspections)

3 The introduction of individual pupil progress measures based on reliable, objective data, is essential. There can be no reliable measure of teacher or school performance without them. Teachers who have worked in schools serving varying communities are acutely aware of the impact of prior attainment and attitude to school, yet Scottish accountability measures largely ignore these factors. Measures which are based on geographic areas of deprivation/affluence are wildly inaccurate, taking no account of confounding factors such as placing requests or housing developments within any given area. HMIE should have a pivotal role in ensuring that progress measures are introduced. (7.3 Reporting the outcome of inspections)

4 An audit process of HMIE gradings should be created and its findings publicised. The danger of socio-economic status having an impact on school gradings is ever present. A robust analysis of school gradings could assure the public and the teaching profession that no such impact exists. Or if it does, take steps to rectify the situation. If it is not already standard practice within HMIE to audit individual inspector outcomes, then that too should be introduced. The notion of tough inspectors versus soft inspectors should not arise in a professional inspection regime. (3.6 Use of grades in inspections)

5 How Good is Our School is overly complex and burdensome on schools. A slimmed down inspection process, focusing on a narrower range of indicators, will allow schools to devote more time to development and improvement rather than producing evidence for a very wide range of topics. Local authorities have a role to play in ensuring schools are fulfilling all aspects of their remit. The inspection process should not interfere with the work of the school, particularly in relation to documentation. If Scotland's schools had shown clear improvement, in international terms, then the continued use of How Good is Our School would be justified. It has not. (9.1 Inspection follow up)

Conclusion

The Scottish inspection regime is in need of a radical overhaul. School inspection should play a major role in maintaining and improving educational standards, and in recent years it has failed to do so. Minor changes to the detail of the process will not be sufficient. A clear strategy to shift the focus of inspection to evidence based outcomes rather than compliance with flawed guidance documentation is required. This paper offers some suggestions as to how to achieve this.