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Abolishing, not reforming, the grading of schools by Ofsted - Colin Richards

Oct 24th, 2017 by Graham.

To be honest almost all schools and inspections are... – ish Only a few schools are clearly and uncontroversially “outstanding”; only a few are undoubtedly “inadequate”. The vast majority are good-ish or requiring improvement-ish. Inspection is not a science but an art; it involves complex judgments all of which don’t necessarily point in the same direction.

Does the recently announced new consultation on short inspections recognise this?

Because of the value judgments involved in school inspection inspectors can never claim that their interpretation of a school is the only correct one . Nor can inspectors claim a monopoly of objective, authoritative, judgment as expressed in an overall grade or description. Equally importantly, the unique set of judgments they give cannot be directly or robustly compared with the equally unique judgments of the same school (which never remains “the same school”) inspected at a different time. Each set of inspection judgments is in a sense sui generis. Direct comparison of inspection judgements over time is at best highly problematic and at worst invalid.

But of course Ofsted does not recognise this. It persists in wanting to place schools into one of four supposedly “water-tight” categories or it has until now when a new consultation on changes to short inspections has been announced.. Under these proposals “good” schools that are not definitely good (whatever that means) are be given up to two years to prove their “goodness” and hence in the meantime are only “good-ish” or even “probably in need of considerable-ish improvement”. Similarly “good” schools that are “outstanding-ish” are promised a full inspection later to confirm their status.

While the issue of grading remains contentious the advent of short inspections for a large number of schools has been widely welcomed and rightly so. But let’s be clear: the new consultation and the unsatisfactory one before it are not primarily the result of Ofsted rethinking the effects of short inspections on schools and students . They are due to the logistical difficulties created by the uncertainty of conversion following an initial inspection and leading to considerable numbers of would-be inspectors not being fully employed .

The new proposals may resolve the logistical issue but will result in three-tier “good” overall judgments , considerable uncertainty and desperate efforts by schools for the up to two years before the follow-up inspection in order to retain “good” or have “outstanding” confirmed..

The answer to Ofsted’s self-created problem is not to come up with another sticking-plaster fix to an insoluble problem. The answer is to reconsider the terms in which schools should be evaluated and reported upon so as to avoid “good-ish” and other problematic notions.

Inevitably and, in my judgment rightly, inspection judgments are not only tentative but qualitative. On an inspection nothing speaks for itself; everything needs interpreting and that interpretation inevitably involves value judgments and the use of qualitative descriptors such as “good”, “very good”, “excellent”, “satisfactory”, “reasonable”, “fair” “poor” etc. There can be no stipulation as to which qualitative terms are to be used; they must “fit” the perceptions of the activity or activities being evaluated. They cannot be reduced to just four numerical grades as under the current Ofsted regime; reality is much more complex than that four-fold categorisation.

That over-simplification may be useful for the purposes of educational accounting but fails to take into account the many-varied facets of educational reality which can only be captured (and then only in part) in well-crafted prose. Inspection teams need the freedom to dispense entirely with artificial, misleading constructs such as overall inspection gradings and to present schools in their idiosyncratic variety with idiosyncratic descriptors to match.. Each inspection report has to be bespoke – not a formulaic account with minimal variation from school to school. Misleading over-simplistic grades should make way for prose which gives a vivid sense of what a particular school is really like –as seen by a group of experienced, expert observers.

Through its second consultation Ofsted is trying – I suspect vainly- to get out of the hole it has dug itself. The answer is both deceptively

simple –abolish overall gradings and the angst that goes with them – and hellishly difficult – creating credible word portraits of schools’ inevitable peculiarities, strengths and weaknesses.

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