

GUEST ESSAY – January 2024

Appreciative Enquiry: A New Inspection Paradigm

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The current inspection paradigm has long since outlived its original purpose. The case for inspection is that it provides an independent, external evaluation and identifies what needs to improve for provision to be good or better.

A renewed focus

What has happened over time is that Ofsted, and its focus upon regulation, accountability and performance measures has created a culture where schools operate according to 'what Ofsted wants' rather than the long-term developmental opportunities of the students it serves. The current system is no longer fit for purpose.

My premise is one where inspection should not be about the threat of surveillance; instead, a collaborative and supportive experience to encourage and improve, not simply measure, wellbeing and educational opportunity in our schools. The system should be rigorous and growth orientated. It should be a process which is professionally engaging.

Look to a better future

Ofsted, like numerous systems internationally, has its own set of metrics to measure a school's effectiveness in achieving excellent curriculum learning outcomes. These are short-term approaches; the truth is that inspections rarely look beyond the here and now. Our school leaders and educators are too often driven to change their ambition and practices in favour of fitting a 'one shoe fits all' system and continually adapt to shifting policy contexts such as changing inspection frameworks.

For example, the area of safeguarding is too important to be subject to the infrequent Ofsted inspection: it should become an annual, mandatory audit overseen by local authorities supported by a body with national oversight.

Far better that the focus of an independent school review becomes centred upon the individual school's values, mission and vision. The drive for school leadership should always focus upon teaching students how to become better learners, so that for the next ten to fifteen years they continually grow and ultimately possess the skills, personal attributes and mindsets to live meaningful and fulfilling lives.

As well as high quality teaching our schools need to give equal focus to improving our students as learners every day, enabling them to nurture and build distinctive abilities, their unique life back-stories. It is a curious thing that when schools adopt such long-term visions, they more than comfortably achieve short-term curriculum and learning outcomes.

Ofsted: a force for improvement

Rather than journey down the path of a 'broken wheel' I would rather discuss an optimistic view of what OFSTED could be if it embraced a transformational change and became a force for sustained improvement. If you look internationally there are alternatives, some focused upon quality assurance as opposed to quality control, celebration rather than 'name and shame'.

Shifting to a quality assurance paradigm enables us to consider the journey rather than going around the block and stopping at the same bus stop every few years. School advisors acting as critical experts can evaluate and support the design, implementation and review of school improvement plans collaborating with the school stakeholders.

The school advisor can be a significant player in a team which can offer a performance review defining the progress that the school has made, as well as outlining future challenges and expectations. This partnership for improvement can include peer assessment in the form of an independent, experienced headteacher from a similar school.

The team will work toward the completion of a collaborative document which identifies where the school is now, how it is improving and reference to the journey ahead. The key part of this document will be recognition for the school in the form of focused commendations, up to three for the high achieving schools, and areas for consideration, up to two areas of focus, depending upon need.

Build a culture of recognition

The recognition of governors, educators and leaders who are ambitious for their schools and have clear values as well as a 'live' vision and mission for their institutions will be both rewarding and motivating. An empathetic school review will have an energising impact for the school community as they continue to challenge themselves and drive toward a stronger future for each of their students.

We need to continually recognise and energise our school communities allowing them to become more diverse educationally and celebrating what makes them different. The combination of measuring what is important to a school and validating it with an external expert would result in a bespoke action plan for each school.

This in turn means the school governance and the school leadership having greater insight and understanding of what is working well and what can be improved.

Appreciative enquiry

For example, an initiative-taking school review team can adopt a Cooperative Appreciative Inquiry approach to focus upon how effectively students are learning, as well as their learning attitudes and context. Instead of our addiction to easily measured standards the following types of questions could engage all stakeholders, informing the future planning.

- Have your students improved as learners this year, and in what ways for each year level?
- Is your vision about each student developing the skills and attributes which will allow them to live fulfilling lives?
- Does your vision enable them to learn individually, collaboratively and exercise student's agency, exercising their free will?
- Do your students access new and unexpected challenges, or do they prefer to stay in their learning comfort zones?
- Do your students see learning as a partnership where they listen to and accept constructive feedback to become better learners?
- Do your students choose to put in the effort to drive their growth?

Partnership for improvement

I am not advocating the dismissal of inspection or external insight, but I do see an opportunity for positive, transformational change. The careful design and use of AI could streamline the role of inspectors whilst ensuring effective compliance is present.

The data analysis which largely determines grading can be undertaken ahead of the school review. The design of the school evaluation and the guiding framework must bring simplification and greater consistency across schools. Schools should be consulted about what they need to improve, and the potential focus for evaluation. This will avoid having to allocate huge resources to show they comply. It will both free up time and allow a stronger focus upon engagement in strategic visioning and design.

The endgame - and indeed the future of inspection - is to ensure appropriate governance, leadership and management, which can be supported, tracked and measured. The inspectors approve the car as roadworthy, not tell the school where and when they can drive.

The world is ever-changing. We need to respect the fact that our individual schools are unique, different and special. Schools should be supported in seeing and knowing what they do in order to deliver a unique, bespoke experience for their communities of learning. We need to imagine better schools which will create better futures for our young people.

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