External Inspection and School Improvement in Challenging Circumstances

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Abstract

This paper reports the preliminary findings of an on-going study into the role of OfSTED as a mechanism for improving secondary schools working in challenging circumstances. A group of recently inspected secondary schools achieving 25% or less 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE was selected and a case study approach utilised to address two separate research questions. Firstly, does OfSTED inspection identify similar priorities for change to those identified internally by schools in challenging circumstances? To answer this question key issues raised by the OfSTED report were compared with pre-inspection internally generated school improvement documentation, and priorities identified during interviews with teaching staff at all levels. Secondly, to what extent does OfSTED inspection generate changes in teaching and non-teaching practice in schools in challenging circumstances? This was explored through the use of questionnaires and interviews. Findings to date suggest a complex relationship between OfSTED inspection and the change process in schools in challenging circumstances. Further research is currently being conducted to investigate the sustainability of any changes generated by OfSTED inspection.

External Inspection and School Improvement in Challenging Circumstances

Introduction

School improvement initiatives have become an integral part of central government policy aimed at raising educational standards (Hopkins, Ainscow and West, 1994). The Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) is an example of a policy that has had a profound effect on our teachers, schools and the wider educational context of England and Wales. Arguably, it has played one of the key roles in national educational reform this century by increasing schools' accountability for their actions, and systematically monitoring their long-term strategic decision making and progress. However, the widely used corporate slogan of '*improvement through inspection*' appears to be less robust in response to criticism. It has been fiercely argued in some sectors that OfSTED has only made limited contributions

towards school development and improvement efforts (Taylor Fitz-Gibbon, 1996;Lonsdale and Parson, 1998; Fitz-Gibbon, 1998). An area where OfSTED has documented much success (OfSTED, 1997; 1999a; 2000) is at the trailing edge of the educational system where schools have been subjected to more regular inspections and visits than one would expect. As these interventions are more frequent and intense one might expect to see disproportionately large improvements in the examination performance of these schools. However, with some notable exceptions this appears not to be the case, although the vast majority do get removed from the OfSTED special measures category (Gray, 2000). This paper outlines the literature relating to OfSTED and school improvement (for a more in-depth exploration see Ferguson, Earley, Fidler and Ouston, 2000; Chapman, 2001), and reports preliminary empirical findings of an on-going research project investigating OfSTED and school improvement in challenging circumstances. In conclusion this paper speculates on a number of changes to the inspection process that may provide more effective support for school improvement than the current framework.

Improvement through inspection: Rhetoric or reality

Earley (1996) suggests that there has been very little research addressing the key question of whether inspection actually plays a significant role in school improvement or development. OfSTED (OfSTED, 1995; OfSTED, 1997; OfSTED, 1999b) has produced a plethora of literature to support its claim of *'improvement through inspection'*, but despite a body of contemporary research within the field this key question largely remains in place:

> *It remains to be seen whether schools improve after inspection. As the first round of inspections of primary and secondary schools has finished and re-inspection has begun, data on improvement will no doubt emerge. It remains to be seen how many key issues (including the very complex ones) have been implemented, their effect and whether schools have been given the same key issues again.*

(Cuckle and Broadhead, 1999: 186)

Research Intelligence (BERA, 2001), the newsletter of the British Educational Research Association, also supports this argument suggesting it is difficult to attribute improvements in statistics mainly to OfSTED inspections for two reasons. First, the improvement to the educational system precedes OfSTED inspections by several years, and second, in Scotland where OfSTED does not operate and a different inspection system is in place a similar pattern of improvement is found. BERA goes on to call for 'a thorough study to be conducted which endeavours to identify the contribution of inspection and other factors to the raising of national standards'.

Changing classrooms through inspection

The current OfSTED framework examines classroom practice in detail paying close attention to the quality of teaching and learning provided. The proliferation of research evidence suggests that variation in effectiveness occurs not only between schools, but also within them (Sammons, Thomas and Mortimore, 1997; Creemers, 1994). Fullan (1991) argues that educational change is dependent on what teachers *think and do* and Reynolds (1999) suggests what happens at the classroom level in terms of teacher practice is important, and can make significant contributions to school improvement.

If OfSTED is to realise its full potential it must not only evaluate classroom processes, but also change them for the better. There are two major opportunities for OfSTED to encourage change at the classroom level. Firstly, at the school level by indicating issues of teaching

and learning as 'key issues' for action. This should result in the school preparing an action plan aimed at improving teaching and learning. The limitation of this model is that improvements in teaching practice may only occur in less effective schools where teaching and learning has been identified as a weakness, such as the case of Brookfield Special School (Aris, Davies and Johnson, 1998). The absence of teaching and learning related issues from the key issues for action does not indicate that teaching is beyond improvement. The only situation where teaching and learning could not be improved in a school (according to OfSTED's definition of teaching and learning) would be where every lesson observed was awarded a grade one. In reality this appears unlikely, therefore another lever to generate improvement at the classroom level is necessary.

The second opportunity for OfSTED to improve classroom practice at the classroom level is through the mechanism of individual feedback to teachers on teaching performance. Lesson observations during the inspection must identify areas for improvement in individual teachers' practice and recommendations for specific changes to the teacher's practice must follow. This model for classroom improvement also has limitations. It relies heavily on three factors. Firstly, the inspector must be able to identify areas for improvement, and secondly, to interact and communicate them effectively with the teacher. Thirdly the teacher must be willing to listen to the suggestions and implement the recommendations.

Brimblecome, Ormston and Shaw (1996) have carried out one of the few studies investigating the relationship between OfSTED inspection and change at the classroom level. They examine teacher intentions to change practice and their perceptions of the inspection process. They accept that intention to change practice may not necessarily equate with actual changes in practice. It is noted that while this is not a particularly satisfactory situation it provides a suitable starting point for future research into this area. Their findings report that just over one-third of teachers that were surveyed intended to change some aspect of their professional practice as a result of OfSTED inspection with teaching style and method (especially relating to differentiation) being the most likely aspect of practice to be changed. These reported changes are directly related to inspection observations and interactions as the questionnaires were administered after inspection but before the publication of the report. They also recognised the importance of feedback in relation to teacher anxiety and intention to change practice. It was not until 1998 that feedback to teachers on their teaching performance became an integral part of every inspection. The effectiveness of this feedback is yet to be substantiated. Many teachers doubt the impact feedback has on their practice in its present form:

> *Inspection weeks are intense and busy times for inspectors and the school. Feedback requires detailed planning and the appropriate atmosphere for teachers to gain the most from it. This is difficult to achieve during inspection week…few teachers in the case study schools could think of ways in which feedback might have had an influence on their practice*

> *(Ferguson et al,. 2000: 49)*

OfSTED has made efforts to improve the quality of feedback by issuing more guidelines to inspectors. The current framework implemented January, 2000 explains:

> *You [the inspector] should offer feedback to every teacher observed. The objective is to improve the teacher's effectiveness. You should try, whenever possible, to give first hand feedback on the lessons [that] you observe. The purpose is to let teachers know your perception of the quality of the lessons*

and the responses of the pupils: what went well; what was less successful; and what could be done more effectively

(OfSTED, 1999b: 127)

However, despite these guidelines the situation is far from satisfactory due to variation in the quantity and quality of feedback received (Chapman, 2001) but some feedback appears to be better than none because it helps to relieve the sense of isolation that many teachers felt before its introduction (Ferguson et al., 2000). If feedback is to have a substantial impact on classroom practice the quality and quantity must be improved. The focus must be on identifying good practice, celebrating success and supporting changes for improvement. Additionally, feedback must be conducted at an appropriate time and in a suitable environment that encourages discussion and reflection.

Brunel University and Helix consulting group (1999) suggest that 58% of schools changed their teaching styles and curricular organization. Assuming that teaching styles and curricular organization equate to changes in classroom practice the difference between these findings and those reported by Brimblecombe and colleagues can be accounted for through methodological differences. Firstly, in the Brunel study it is not clear when the questionnaires were administered or collected in relation to the actual inspection. However it is implied that they were collected after the publication of the report, and therefore after key issues were identified and priorities for development agreed. This suggests the higher figure of 58% compared to the 38% reported by Brimblecombe and colleagues (1996) also includes changes in practice generated indirectly from inspection through the post-OfSTED development plan which may account for the disparity between the findings. Second, the Brunel study only surveyed head teachers. Improving the Quality of Education for All (IQEA) data suggest that senior managers have a 'rosier view' of the management conditions in their school than other categories of staff (Ainscow, Beresford, Harris, Hopkins, Southworth and West, 2000). This may begin to explain the void between school rhetoric and classroom reality. Headteachers may have overestimated the changes in practice at the classroom level by assuming all teachers had implemented any changes as requested. It could be argued that the second difference suggests that the Brunel University and Helix group report of 58% changes in teaching style and curricular organization is an overestimate of the effect of OfSTED at the classroom level.

Lowe (1998) described the extent of implementation of inspection recommendations one year after inspection, and teachers' responses to their associated discourses, opportunities for 'real' change in the classroom were then commented on. He reported that only one of the seven case study schools had substantially implemented inspection recommendations related to teaching and learning, while three had demonstrated some implementation, and the remaining three either limited or no implementation of the recommendations. Lowe (1998) reports of one case study school:

> *OfSTED's views about the quality of teaching and learning had not penetrated the classroom and teachers still maintained their right to determine the scope of teaching and learning.*

This experience supports the view that OfSTED only has a limited impact on change in the classroom, and that teachers are maintaining their professional integrity despite an external attempt to reduce their knowledge and skills to a technical level. This argument may also suggest that the 'tyranny' of an OfSTED orthodoxy (Brighouse and Moon, 1995) is being avoided by teachers rejecting OfSTED's values and continuing to practice what they believe to be 'best practice' in their own classrooms.

More recent research suggests that not only is the level of classroom change limited, but there is significant variation in teacher responses and reactions to the process in different school contexts. Chapman and Harris (2001) argue that teachers in schools with more positive cultures have more positive perceptions and reactions to the inspection process, therefore they are more likely to change their practice as a result of inspection. However, they also note that further large-scale research is needed on which secure generalisations can be made relating to the effectiveness of the OfSTED inspection process for schools in different contexts.

Towards a future framework

Much has been written about the possible alternatives to the current inspection system that may do more to promote school improvement (OfSTIN, 1997; MacBeath, 1999; Ferguson et al., 2000; Learmonth, 2001). Most of these highlight the importance of self-evaluation or review. However, as Ferguson and colleagues (2000) note, few commentators would argue for the complete replacement of OfSTED with a system based purely on self-evaluation. It has become recongnised that a more effective system of inspection would require both internal and external perspectives (Hargreaves, 1995; Barber, 1996). The important factor is the weighting that is given to each element. Most commentators argue for a shift along the continuum from the highly pressurised current model where external evaluation dominates, to a position where there is a greater balance between pressure and support, and internal self-evaluation is given a higher profile. The key challenge for the development of a new school evaluation system is to create the optimum levels of internal/external and pressure/support that will promote maximum improvement.

Research methods

This study focuses on OfSTED inspection and school improvement in a group of 620 secondary schools where 25% or less pupils achieved 5 or more higher GCSE grades at the end of the Summer term 1999 and/or 2000. These schools have been identified by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as 'Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances' despite exhibiting a wide range of effectiveness levels and improvement trajectories. A disproportionate number (10.6%) were deemed to be 'failing or at risk of failing' and therefore placed on special measures, the national average for secondary schools being 2-3%. These schools also face higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage than one might expect. The average percentage of pupils registered for free school meals was 36% compared to the national average of 19%; although the range is heavily skewed to higher levels it varies from 6-84% (Reynolds et al., 2001).

The study adopted a mixed methodological approach to investigate a number of research questions. This paper explores four of these questions relating to the OfSTED inspection

process and school improvement:

> *How do teachers perceive the inspection process?*
> *Does inspection generate changes in teaching and non-teaching practice?*
> *Does inspection identify similar priorities for improvement as those identified by the school?*
> *What are the barriers to improvement that schools facing challenging contexts face?*

Identifying potential case study schools

Filters were employed to reduce the number of schools from 620 to a group of less than sixty. First, only schools where 25% or less pupils achieved top GCSE grades in both 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 were included. This reduced the population to 378 schools without distorting the mean free school meal (FSM) proportion found within the group or the percentage of schools on Special Measures. Second, only schools inspected after January 2000 were included. This reduced the population to less than sixty schools, and had dual purposes. It compressed the total population further without distorting the mean proportions of FSMs or schools on Special Measures. It also ensured parity when using documentary evidence as the basis for cross case contextual analysis as all schools had been last inspected under the same framework (OfSTED, 1999b).

Selecting case study schools

The selection of ten case study schools was opportunistic in two senses. Initially geographical location was considered; the schools were selected from the wider midlands region, and secondly, the headteacher had to agree to access for research purposes. Care was taken to ensure that the group of schools represented a wide range of contexts and variation in characteristics, therefore ensuring 'maximum variation sampling' (Maykutt and Morehouse, 1994) including:

Schools located within a range of socio-economic and cultural situations (inner city, urban, rural, and mixed catchments, and those with predominantly one ethnic group and also mixed and multiethnic groups).
Schools that were operating at different effectiveness levels (Special Measures, declining, stagnant and improving)
Schools with different leadership characteristics based on the headteacher (gender, time in post and previous experience)

Past OfSTED and HMI reports and performance data including league tables, value added and family group analyses (where available), combined with the school management conditions rating survey were used in an attempt to gain an understanding of the schools' levels of effectiveness and improvement trajectories.

Data collection and analysis

The research design adopted an approach utilizing multiple data collection methods (Denzin, 1978) including:

Analysis of documentary evidence
Management conditions rating survey
One-to-one and group interviews

Documentary evidence was analysed to contextualise the interview data. The management conditions rating survey provided a further indicator of school culture and capacity to improve. These data provided comparisons between cases and also to nationally generated norms. For detailed notes on method see Creating the Conditions for School Improvement (Ainscow et al., 2000)

One-to-one interviews were conducted with headteachers on three occasions. Group interviews lasting forty-five minutes to one hour were conducted with senior managers, middle managers and classroom teachers. All available deputies took part in the senior management interviews. Where possible middle managers from the core subjects were

interviewed. In cases where this was not possible, due to the post being vacant or other practical reasons, potential interviewees were nominated by the headteacher and then approached by the research team; this was also the case for classroom teachers. Where possible it was ensured that interviewees exhibited a range of age, experience and time in post and balance of gender. All interviews were semi-structured in nature and based on the same generic questions. With the permission of the interviewees audio-cassette recordings were made and fully transcribed. The transcriptions were then returned to the interviewees for validation purposes. Selected highlights were transferred to memorandum recorders for use as direct quotations. Small scale piloting of the instruments took place and minor modifications were made prior to the field visits.

Data analysis is ongoing, both within case and between cases. Matrices exploring the dimensions of hierarchical position against research issues are being used to illuminate issues, themes and tensions within and between hierarchical levels (Miles and Huberman, 1992).

Research findings

This section of this paper reports the contextual information from one case study school (School A). This case is then used to illustrate preliminary findings from the study. These findings are reported as banner headlines and emerging themes under four sub-sections:

How do teachers perceive the inspection process?
Does inspection generate changes in practice?
Does inspection identify similar priorities for improvement as those identified by the school?
What are the barriers to school improvement that schools facing challenging circumstances face?

These preliminary findings must be treated with caution. Only completed in-depth analysis of all schools, supported by further research will allow firm conclusions to be drawn from which secure generalisations can be made.

School A Case study

An introduction to context

School A is a comprehensive 11-18 mixed community school with 831 pupils on roll, including 94 in the sixth form. The school is situated to the north of a major midlands city and the catchment area is composed of mixed housing. OfSTED (2001a) states that there are significantly more than average numbers of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds with 37% of pupils registered for free school meals. 51% of pupils are listed on the school's special educational needs register and 9% of pupils have English as an additional language.

Pupils' attainment on entry covers the full range of attainment but over half the pupils enter the school with attainment levels at least two years behind the national average attainment in the key stage 2 SATs. Therefore, attainment on entry is well below average. From 1998-2000 school A performed well below average compared with all schools and similar schools in GCSE examinations. In July 1999 the percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSE grade A*-C was 13% and in 2000 18%. The percentage of pupils leaving with 5 or more GCSE grades A*-G was 68% in 1999, and 77% in 2000. The percentage of pupils leaving with 1 or more grades A*-G at GCSE in 1999 was 79% and 87% in 2000. All three of these commonly used indicators demonstrate improvement in this short time frame.

The school is well led and managed by the headteacher and senior management team. The OfSTED inspection, January 2001 reported that 'This is an effective school that has improved considerably over the past four years'. Over the four year period since school A was placed on special measures OfSTED claims that the quality of teaching and management have improved and that challenging whole school targets are now in place. Areas for further improvement identified by OfSTED include attendance, management and teaching in two subjects, schemes of work, consistency in policies and procedures.

A brief history of OfSTED/HMI inspection experience

March 1997 section 10 full inspection.

School A placed on special measures because of failing to give its pupils an acceptable level of education.

December 1997, March 98, and October 98.

School A subjected to HMI monitoring visits to assess progress made on key issues in the inspection report of March 97.

February 1998 HMI section 3 and 10 inspection.

This inspection assessed the quality of education provided and the progress that school A had made in relation to the main findings and key issues in the inspection report of March 1997 and the action plan prepared by the governors to address the key issues.

February 1999

In accordance with section 14 of the School Inspections Act 1996 School A is removed from special measures.

January 2001

School A receives a positive report from a full section 10 inspection.

School A: Management conditions survey

For a full breakdown of the management conditions survey see appendix A. Senior management in School A rated all areas of behaviour more highly than the middle managers. Senior management rated all behaviours higher than their national counterparts, with the exception of confidentiality, taking parents' views into account over curriculum changes and organisation of the school's time for professional development.

Despite rating behaviours less positively than senior management, middle managers rated leadership higher than national norms. Middle mangers rated involvement, staff development, co-ordination and leadership lower than classroom teachers.

Classroom teachers scored all 24 behaviours higher than national norms. There was little discrepancy between the perceptions of permanent and temporary teachers except that temporary teachers rated involvement lower.

Initial findings: Banner headlines and emerging themes

How do teachers perceive the inspection process?

Two important themes are emerging from the data relating to teachers' perception of the inspection process: the development of the inspection process over time and, the impact of inspection pressure on staff turnover. When considering the development of the process one classroom teacher recognised changes in the inspection process stating that 'OfSTED are trying to move forward' by involving and discussing issues with teachers. Another highlighted the importance of feedback from inspectors as a positive development:

> The actual inspection was very different to the one that we had in the school previously. It seemed less cold, less icy. It seemed that people were more willing to make time and talk to you more about things and discuss…before it was a case of arriving with a clipboard and writing things down and then off they went. But this time there was a chance to discuss things, which was much better. (Classroom teacher, School A)

The middle managers interviewed held the inspection process partially responsible for high levels of staff turnover. They reported high stress levels, workload, and lack of job satisfaction as important contributing factors and implied that OfSTED was partially responsible for this situation through the level of pressure that special measures and subsequent inspections subjected the staff to. Ironically, one middle manager felt that OfSTED had reaffirmed their need to teach rather than manage children, contributing further to this pressure:

> It's about job satisfaction. It is being able to do more and get more achievement. The best week that I have had here, the best by far, is [sic] the week that OfSTED came in because I was able to do some teaching and that started to make me think, you need to get out, yes, because this is what you are missing. You are missing being able to relax and chat and build up relationships. I mean that you can do some of this but it is very, very hard work. (Middle manager, School A)

Does inspection generate changes in practice?

Senior managers at school A indicated that the inspection process had encouraged reflection and discussion. The headteacher of School A felt that the pre-inspection form S4 was a powerful tool for reflection that had an important effect on the school by stimulating honest open discussion:

> A lot of their [form S4] questions are saying if you are doing this how does it affect your achievement… You really have to concentrate your mind as to how is this actually affecting achievement…So I think, I think, is a very good document…that probably had more effect on us than the actual inspection... when we [school staff] discussed it we were totally honest, no audience, nothing. (Headteacher, school A)

A senior manager implied that OfSTED was responsible for a change in her thinking, reporting that she was 'far more interested in making change happen much more quickly, much more quickly.' However, this could not be articulated in terms of actual changes that she had made to her practice.

Middle managers and Classroom teachers reported that the inspection process has had only marginal influence on their teaching or non-teaching practice. The middle managers agreed that OfSTED drove the writing of schemes of work, but they made no reference to re-writing or updating them as an ongoing process. Classroom teachers found it most difficult to identify areas of their own practice that had changed as a result of the inspection. A classroom teacher reported that:

> *There is nothing really that I'm doing different now from what I was doing before [the inspection]. (Classroom teacher, School A)*

while another reported that:

> *I continue to teach the same way and OfSTED has not made any difference to that. I taught the same way after the last three OfSTEDs. (Classroom teacher, School A)*

Does inspection identify similar priorities for improvement as those identified by the school?

With the exception of middle managers all levels of staff within the school reported that the school was aware of the priorities for improvement identified by OfSTED before the inspection. The headteacher reported that the process of inspection was more important than the inspection itself and that 'the inspection did not actually come up with too much'. The two senior managers interviewed were adamant that OfSTED did not highlight anything that the school was not aware of and went on to add that they would have been 'fiercely criticised if that had been the case'. The three classroom teachers interviewed also agreed that there were no surprises, but accepted that inspection brought things into focus and concentrated the mind:

> *I suppose it brings it into focus. I think that we are all aware of the things like attendance, the under achievement of boys in the school and things like that, key things that came with the report (Classroom teacher, School A)*
>
> *There were not any shocks though, because it focuses what you already know.*
>
> *(Classroom teacher, School A)*

While the general consensus was that OfSTED did not highlight any issues that the school was not aware of, it does not necessarily mean that the school was addressing these issues prior to an inspection. As a classroom teacher pointed out:

> *If OfSTED give it a certain degree of emphasis then it becomes more emphasised within the school. (Classroom teacher, School A)*

Interestingly, the three middle managers interviewed were surprised by some of the issues such as the attention paid to schemes of work and some of the subject areas identified as being weak. One middle manager was disappointed with the inspectors failing to identify or not reporting issues:

> *There are things not mentioned in the OfSTED report which I thought should have been.*

(Middle manager, School A)

while another pointed out:

> *Things that either they mentioned it. But said that it was OK. But you know on a day to day basis that it is not. The issue of bullying. There was no problem. Which basically means that there is no bullying in the school. I am not sure that this is the case. (Middle manager, School A)*

What are the barriers to improvement that schools facing challenging contexts face?

Observations made during field visits, reflections on field notes from ten schools and preliminary data analysis of interviews conducted in five schools suggest that there are a number of internal features that schools facing challenging circumstances tend to exhibit:

> *Low capacity for internally driven improvement;*
> *Weak or inappropriate leadership at one or morelevels;*
> *Low levels of continuing professional development;*
> *Factions of competing staff ;*
> *A number of inexperienced persons in positions of responsibility;*
> *High staff mobility;*
> *Inappropriate structures and policies;*
> *Low expectations, staff and pupils.*

Many of these internal challenges are also compounded by external conditions these schools face. Although most of these schools are situated in urban areas, external contextual factors other than location, size and ethnic mix appear to be important in contributing to challenging circumstances. Data suggest that the following factors are likely to be important:

> *Creaming of pupils by other schools and authorities*
> *Low community expectations;*
> *Higher than expected levels of socio-economic deprivation;*
> *High pupil mobility;*
> *High proportion of pupils with English as an additional language.*

It is clear that the nature of the challenges faced by these schools make them very hard places to teach (OfSTED, 2000) and arguably the hardest schools to generate sustained improvement.

Discussion

Teachers' perceptions of the inspection process

The limited contemporary literature base implies that not only do few teachers change their practice as a result of inspection but over time become they less likely to do so (Brimblecombe et al., 1996; Chapman, 2001). Early analyses of the interview data support this view. Teachers appear to view the inspection process as an inevitable cyclical 'hoop to jump through'. Perhaps teachers are increasingly ambivalent to the process and over time have become 'inspection fatigued' or 'hardened' to the regime. If this is the case, now is the

time to be developing a new model for external evaluation/improvement that can initiate and sustain classroom change more effectively.

Interview data suggest that middle managers had the least positive perceptions of the inspection process. An explanation for this perception may be that OfSTED inspection has played an important role in increasing the accountability of middle managers and their departments. One example of this is lesson observations assessing the quality of teaching in each subject and another is the publication of an inspection report with a section dedicated to the description of the state of each department.

Analysis of the management conditions survey also suggests that in general middle managers have a less positive view of the school than senior managers and class teachers. Recently, commentators have argued that departments and middle managers are central to securing successful school improvement (Busher and Harris, 2000; Harris, 2001). It may be that this central role is at least partially responsible for these perceptions due to the complex nature of relationships that they have to manage. The middle managers' position in the school hierarchy exposes them to complex demands from different power groups. These demands can be diverse and may range from the implementation of externally driven top-down directives to requests for extra support from individual classroom teachers. Potentially middle managers act as a buffer and negotiator between senior management and teachers, while attempting to achieve oganisational goals set in the form of development plans and targets.

Increasingly sophisticated demands placed on middle managers, combined with increased accountability at department level has contributed to the changing scope of middle management in recent times. Could the reported levels of stress, workload and job satisfaction be related to these changes? If so, the lack of support through strategic co-ordinated continuing professional development (CPD) provision for middle managers has been even more costly than initially thought. A period of further consultation is necessary between all stakeholders to effectively assess the nature of CPD provision that middle managers require.

Changing practice through inspection

While changes in practice appear limited, the interesting issues that these data raise relate to the nature of these changes. First, as one moves through the layers of the school from headteacher to classroom teacher there appears to be greater reluctance to change practice. Does this suggest that OfSTED is a more effective tool at changing management or non-classroom practices rather than classroom practice? Or simply that teachers are less able to identify, or prepared to report, changes in practice? Second, the changes made to practice appear to be changes that could be generated without the expense and pressure of an OfSTED inspection. For example reflection and self-review could be local authority or consultant supported and the generation and update of schemes of work could be supported by a subject specialist CPD provider. Third, the continued OfSTED focus on classroom observations as a source of reliable evidence appears to be misguided. In addition to the concerns raised by Fitz-Gibbon (1998) further doubt must be cast on the validity of lesson observation grading. Over time higher grades are being awarded yet teachers are reporting that their practice is not changing from one inspection to the next. Fourth, OfSTED as a lever for change at the classroom level appears to be limited therefore a more productive and sustainable model for generating classroom improvement is needed. Over 90% of teachers that reported that they intended to change their practice as a result of inspection did so because of feedback from inspectors (Chapman, 2001). Variation in the quality and quantity of feedback received must be minimised in order to harness OfSTED's potential for

improvement at the classroom level. One small step towards this could include inspectors offering a feedback 'minimum standard guarantee' to all teachers.

Arguably, these levels of change suggest that OfSTED inspection in its present form has only a marginal capacity to improve schools. Perhaps we have arrived at a situation where an OfSTED orthodoxy has been accomplished within our educational system and most schools are conforming to the national policy-driven definitions and agendas for education. If so, further questions must be asked relating to the number and quality of innovations being developed within classrooms, and whether the existing climate can support successfully the experimentation and artistry necessary to engage pupils in meaningful learning.

Identifying priorities for improvement

The data suggest that the schools had an overall sense of the challenges and issues that they faced and what was needed to be done to address them. However, as implied by the classroom teachers of School A this does not mean that in practice they were being tackled prior to the inspection. Examination of pre-inspection documentation suggested that the issues were identified and being, or planned to be addressed before the inspection took place. Further work in this area is needed: the fact that an issue appears on the development plan does not necessarily indicate the reality of the situation and there can often be a gulf between policy rhetoric and action in practice.

The middle managers' perspective in School A is particularly interesting, as it contradicts other perspectives within the school and comments on issues not included in the report. Arguably, this is a further indicator of the tensions and dilemmas that middle managers face. Perhaps their proximity and relationship with both classroom teachers and senior managers has developed a perspective that is moulded by both parties. This unique position may allow them to hold the most complete view of school life. After all, it is hard to imagine that senior managers would want issues such as bullying and poor behaviour highlighted, rather than the bare minimum, However one might expect, or understand classroom teachers focusing on these issues as they can directly affect classroom processes.

Removing the barriers to improvement

Although there appear to be common barriers to improvement facing these schools, it would be wrong to suggest that all schools exhibit all of the features, for example, all staff and pupils have low expectations in any one particular school. School effectiveness research has demonstrated that the variations in performance are greater within schools than between schools (Creemers, 1994). It is not unreasonable to hypothesise that the same is the case for many of the above features. Furthermore the observed cultures of these schools appear to be complex and diverse: the full range of cultures described by Stoll and Fink (1996) can be observed, although they appear to be weighted to the less positive typologies, except in the most effective and improving schools. Similarly, this group appears to contain schools with a skewed range of effectiveness levels and improvement trajectories (Reynolds et al., 2001).

OfSTED's role in overcoming the barriers to improvement

Argueably, audit and evaluation mechanisms conducted by OfSTED have the capability to identify the barriers to improvement facing schools in challenging circumstances. However, for OfSTED to make a significant contribution to school improvement the process must have the power to develop and implement strategies that can overcome these barriers. To maximise the chances of success these strategies must also be sensitive to the development phase and context of the school.

A wide range of external improvement strategies play a role in the work and lives of schools facing challenging circumstances. Therefore, the inspection process cannot be considered in isolation. This further complicates the relationship between OfSTED and school improvement creating difficulties linking specific interventions to improved outcomes. In addition to this complex scenario, the ever evolving framework further hinders us from successfully evaluating OfSTED's contribution to school improvement over time. A more sophisticated approach to evaluating school improvement efforts, and school improvement in general is required. This will be further challenged by the need to move towards context specific school improvement interventions. If OfSTED can accept these challenges it has a role to play in the future improvement of our schools.

Wider propositions and further speculation

The possible implications of these findings for future frameworks or inspection systems are significant: irrespective of content they must be flexible enough to provide a stimulus for the growth and development of both teachers, and schools in diverse contexts. The process must be rigorous, yet sensitive to schools at different stages of development, and exhibiting diverse cultural typologies, structures and perhaps most importantly differential capacities for change. A possible course of action for OfSTED could be to conduct a thorough audit of schools based on locally agreed criteria negotiated in consultation with schools and local authorities. This would help to identify a context specific 'improvement mix' that reflected local stakeholder needs in addition to national priorities. Furthermore, the development of an on-going collaborative relationship between the school, local stakeholders and inspection team would be needed to implement, monitor and support change, and from this local, regional and national networks built to share ideas and practice. This new found communication between stakeholders and re-engagement at the local level, combined with a gentle shift in the balance from pressure to support would increase the possibilities for school improvement. Schools would have the possibility to reap the rewards of sustainable improvement that the current model has failed to yield.

Final commentary

The emerging findings from this study highlight some interesting tensions, dilemmas and challenges relating to the internal and external nature of school evaluation, the dimensions of improvement and accountability within the process, and possibilities for the future role of OfSTED.

The consultation paper, Improving Inspection, Improving Schools (OfSTED, 2001) outlines sixteen issues for consideration relating to the improvement of the inspection framework for 2003. Two important issues outlined in the publication are the nature of feedback given to schools and teachers, and the concept of context specific inspections. If this consultation paper stimulates genuine discussion and these issues can be addressed by implementing significant changes to the inspection model, the possibility for improving inspection still exists. However, whether inspection can improve schools is another question requiring further research.

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	Senior Management	Middle Management	Permanent Teachers	Temporary Teachers	Support Staff	All
	2	19	19	3	1	44
In this school we talk about the quality of our teaching.	4.0	3.3	3.2	3.7	4.0	3.3
As a school we review the progress of changes we introduce.	4.0	3.1	2.9	3.3	3.0	3.1
Teachers make time to review their classroom practice.	4.0	2.8	3.3	3.7	3.0	3.1
The school takes care over issues of confidentiality	3.5	3.5	3.6	4.0	3.0	3.5
Our long-term aims are reflected in the school's plans.	4.0	3.2	3.4	4.0	4.0	3.4
In our school the process of planning is regarded as being more important than the written plan.	3.5	3.1	2.9	3.3	2.0	2.8
Everyone is fully aware of the school's development priorities.	3.5	3.4	3.4	3.3	3.0	3.4
In the school we review and modify our plans.	3.5	2.9	3.2	2.7	3.0	3.1

In this school we ask students for their views before we make major changes.	2.0	1.8	2.2	1.3	1.0	1.9
This school takes parents' views into consideration when changes are made to the curriculum.	1.5	1.9	2.2	1.7	2.0	2.0
Governors and staff work together to decide future directions for the school.	3.5	2.5	2.9	2.7	3.0	2.7
We make effective use of outside support agencies in our development work.	3.0	2.5	3.1	2.3	2.0	2.8
Professional learning is valued in this school.	4.0	2.8	3.2	4.0	3.0	3.1
In devising school policies emphasis is placed on professional development.	4.0	2.6	3.2	3.0	3.0	2.9
In this school the focus of staff development is on the classroom.	4.0	2.8	3.3	3.3	3.0	3.1
The school's organisation provides time for staff development.	2.5	2.4	2.8	3.3	2.0	2.7
Staff taking on co-ordinating roles are skilful in working with colleagues.	3.0	2.8	3.1	3.0	3.0	2.9
We get tasks done by working in teams.	3.0	2.9	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Staff are kept informed about key decisions.	4.0	2.9	3.1	3.3	3.0	3.1
We share experiences about the improvement of classroom practices.	4.0	2.7	3.1	3.0	3.0	3.0
Staff in the school have a clear vision of where we are going.	3.0	3.0	3.2	3.0	2.0	3.1
Senior staff delegate difficult and challenging tasks.	3.5	3.2	3.2	3.3	2.0	3.2

Senior management take a lead over development priorities.	4.0	3.2	3.5	3.3	2.0	3.3
Staff are given opportunities to take on leadership roles.	4.0	3.1	3.3	3.3	2.0	3.2