

The curriculum

Posted by: [Sean Harford](#), Posted on: 24 April 2018

The last of our spring conferences for school inspectors took place on Friday 20th April.

In total, around 1,600 inspectors attended the four conferences, with two held in Nottingham and Manchester in March and two more in London in April. Along with our autumn conferences, these events form part of our ongoing training to ensure the consistency, quality, reliability and validity of our inspection practice. So, I thought I would share with you some of the things we discussed this time.

Inspection is above all about human judgement. Therefore, the quality of Ofsted's work and our value as a force for improvement depend absolutely on the knowledge and expertise of our inspectors.

Sometimes, the public debate gets stuck at the level of inspection grades, especially the overall effectiveness judgement. But the professional conversations between inspectors and school leaders are where the greatest value in our work lies. When we get this right - and we usually do - our work is acknowledged as constructive, helpful and, occasionally, even enjoyable by those on the other side of the process.

With all this in mind, the single most important thing Ofsted can do is to make sure all our inspectors are supported and well equipped - intellectually and practically - for the work we have to do. Our autumn and spring conferences are a central part of this preparation.

This year's conferences mainly focused on curriculum, specifically how a deeper understanding of what we mean by curriculum can inform our inspection practice. We also held sessions on all the different ways in which children fall out of mainstream education, and on careers education.

It's the sessions on the curriculum that I want to talk about here.

Our overall aim was to help inspectors evaluate how well a school's curriculum is designed and implemented - both within the context of the current Ofsted framework and school inspection handbook and, as we develop an even sharper focus on the curriculum, for the education inspection framework 2019.

We discussed the need to build a conversation about the curriculum on a clear understanding of how children - and indeed all of us - really learn, over time. So, we asked ourselves what progress really is, and acknowledged that both knowing more and remembering more, are central to it.

We discussed the idea that knowledge is 'sticky' - which, for schools, means that the more children know, the more they can learn. So this is a matter of social justice too. For some children, especially the most disadvantaged, school is often the only place where they have the opportunity to gain knowledge of the concepts and vocabulary that will enable them to learn effectively alongside their peers and succeed in the long term. Indeed, research from both the US and UK has highlighted the growing gap that emerges if schools do not do this well.

What exactly do we mean by curriculum?

Most people are aware that Ofsted has been carrying out research on the curriculum for the best part of a year now. We discussed our initial findings in a [commentary from Amanda Spielman](#), published in October 2017.

One of the general findings from the review was that we don't have a common language for curriculum. To help here, we came up with a working definition, which states that curriculum is...

A framework for setting out the aims of a programme of education, including the knowledge and understanding to be gained at each stage (intent)...

...for translating that framework over time into a structure and narrative, within an institutional context (implementation)...

...and for evaluating what knowledge and understanding pupils have gained against expectations (impact).

We have asked our inspectors to apply this definition to their practice and explore these three areas of intent, implementation and impact when evaluating a school's curriculum. In other words, what is a school trying to achieve through its curriculum, how is it being delivered and what difference is it making to pupils' learning.

These ideas are not new: rather they are about making visible what has sometimes been lost sight of. Effective schools have always thought carefully about the intentions behind their curriculum design, its structure and implementation, and how it builds pupils' knowledge over time.

I also want to emphasise two things: Ofsted does not have a preferred curriculum, and our current inspection framework and handbook have not changed. There is no specific graded judgement on the curriculum, so we are not asking inspectors to grade it now. However, the curriculum already features within the judgements we make about a school's leadership and management, and teaching, learning and assessment. This working definition is a useful tool to help inspectors have the right conversations with schools, within the context of the current framework and handbook.

The next phase of our curriculum research is well under way and we'll publish the findings from that in due course. Ultimately, all of this work is helping to shape the education inspection framework that will apply from September 2019. Until then, there is no change to the weighting given to the curriculum or how we reach our judgements.

Assessment – what are inspectors looking at?

Posted by: [Sean Harford](#), Posted on: 23 April 2018 - Categories: [Inspection](#), [Schools](#)

In a previous blog, I discussed data and how it must not be the be-all and end-all of an inspection. I want to build on that and talk about assessment.

There's been a great deal of change, as you know, in assessment over the past few years. Rightly, the blunt instrument of levels has been removed and replaced by the freedom for different schools to develop assessment systems of their choosing. With this needs to come a move to a far more sophisticated way of thinking about how we assess pupils. And of course, what also comes is the need for sharper thinking about how assessment sits within the curriculum. I like Tim Oates' remark about how good assessment is 'an insight into the mental life of the children'.

When it comes to inspection, inspectors are looking to see that a school's assessment system supports the pupils' journeys through the curriculum. It's really important that schools don't design assessment around what they think inspectors will want to see.

I reiterate: inspectors do not need to see quantities of data, spreadsheets, graphs and charts on how children are performing. We don't want to see a specific amount, frequency or type of marking. You know what's right for your pupils and we trust you to design systems that reflect their achievement – the achievement that's come about through the teaching within your curriculum.

I was asked recently on Twitter what I thought was the biggest flaw in assessment across schools currently. My 280 character response was intended to get across this: I think there is too much marking being expected compared with the resultant benefits to pupils' learning; too much reliance on meaningless data; and too little meaningful assessment of the right things at the right point in the curriculum.

As inspectors, we can help here. We shouldn't be asking you to predict progress or attainment scores. This is for the very good reason that they're based on the national performance of each cohort, so they can't be compared until everyone's taken the test. 'Expected progress' was removed as an accountability measure in 2015 by the Department for Education.

What inspectors do want to see is the assessment information your school uses, in the format that you find works best, to help you know how well your pupils' are doing at the point they are at in your curriculum. And then, crucially, what you do with that information to support better pupil achievement. We'll then evaluate how well your school is supporting pupils to progress and deepen their knowledge, in order to promote understanding and develop their skills.

By progress, we mean pupils knowing more and remembering more. Has a child really gained the knowledge to understand the key concepts and ideas? Is this enabling them to develop the skills they need to master?

Ofsted is only one part of the national accountability system. The assessment that schools carry out – including formative assessment, in-school summative assessment and nationally standardised summative assessments – all do different jobs. But the key reason for all assessment is to ensure that teaching and

learning are working well and that children are benefiting from a deep and rich education. Bear that in mind and none of us can go far wrong.

Risk assessment process for good and outstanding schools

Posted by: [Sean Harford](#), Posted on: 17 April 2018 - Categories: [Inspection](#), [Schools](#)

I'm aware that some questions have recently been asked about our updated methodology for risk assessing good and outstanding schools and academies. Rather than attempt to answer every question individually via Twitter, I thought it would be better to respond to them all here.

First, I can understand why the words 'machine learning algorithm' gave some people a bit of a fright. But in reality, our risk assessment has changed very little since the previous methodology note was published.

Ofsted has risk assessed schools and academies for many years in order to help allocate inspection resource where it is most needed. It has never been used to pre-judge inspection grades.

The model has evolved over the years, as inspection frameworks and accountability measures have changed. The main change this time is a new statistical model, which we have found to work well within the data-analysis stage of our risk assessment process.

Like any modern organisation, we are keen to embrace the benefits of technology. But while it may sound ominous, 'machine learning' simply refers to a computer programme that helps us identify potential decline in a school, and that then re-jigs the underlying algorithm when inspection outcomes are known. It doesn't mean we're now using computers to make decisions without any human intervention, or indeed to judge schools. As before, Senior HMIs in the eight Ofsted regions will always thoroughly review the selection of schools for inspection and well-trained, experienced school inspectors will inspect on site.

So what do we use the risk assessment process for then? Well, as our handbook states, some good schools will automatically receive a full section 5 inspection instead of a section 8 short inspection. This occurs when our risk assessment process indicates that the quality of provision may have deteriorated significantly.

Outstanding primary and secondary schools are of course exempt from routine inspection.

However, if the risk assessment raises concerns about the performance of an exempt school, then it may also be inspected.

The new computer model uses progress and attainment data from the Department for Education, enhanced with school workforce census data and [Parent View](#) responses, to produce scores for each school, ranging from the lowest risk up to the highest risk. These scores are on a continuous scale, so there are no thresholds that automatically determine that a school should be inspected.

Of course, inspection outcomes will always be based on the evidence gathered on site. So to avoid them having undue influence, inspectors are not given the findings of the risk assessment.

The basic ideas behind the risk assessment process are outlined in our [inspection handbook](#). We wrote the methodology note for those of you who like to know more detail about the statistical methodology involved. If it sounds a little like the rise of the machines, I can assure you that it's really not like that at all.