

Education Select Committee inquiry into the role and performance of Ofsted

Submission from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

8 October 2010

1. Executive summary

1.1. It is ATL's view that it is futile to review Ofsted without reviewing the whole accountability system for schools.

1.2. We believe that the severe negative impacts on both students and staff outweigh any achievement of the government's desired aims for Ofsted inspections.

1.3. There are serious question marks over Ofsted's consistency and the quality of inspections, in particular an over-reliance on examination data. Given this, we question the government's decision to use Ofsted judgments as a basis for entirely separate policy, such as the expansion of Academies.

1.4. We strongly advocate a shift from national to local accountability for schools. Ofsted should cease to undertake section 5 inspections and its role would be to quality assure local processes. Government should commission an independent review to redefine Ofsted's form and function.

1.5. It is even more vital that the accountability system and Ofsted inspections are fully reviewed in light of the government's plans for academies and free schools which will sit outside of local authority structures.

2. About the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

ATL, the education union

2.1. ATL, as a leading education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.

2.2. We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers through partnership and by lobbying.

ATL policy

2.3. ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within

light national parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders; assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools and colleges are increasingly encouraged to work collaboratively to offer excellent teaching and learning, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition

3. Ofsted is only a part of the accountability system

3.1. It is ATL's view that it is futile to review Ofsted without reviewing the whole accountability system for schools.

3.2. ATL believes that accountability is a duty on all public servants and especially those entrusted with the education of future generations. However, accountability must be balanced against professional autonomy.

3.3. We said in our submission to the Select Committee for Children, Schools and Families' 2009/10 enquiry into school accountability that "Professional accountability implies commitment to evaluate and improve, it does not require a juggernaut of data collection and detailed comparison of schools". The current accountability system gives undue weight to central government, particularly through national test data and Ofsted inspection. This leads to a narrowing of the curriculum and mitigates against professional reflection, innovation and creativity. We must remember that schools are accountable beyond central government; to parents, the governing body and the local community. The accountability system must rebalance these interests.

3.4. Ofsted inspection of schools is a mechanism for holding individual schools to account. However, schools do not operate in isolation from each other; they work within a context of multiple external factors which affect pupils' learning and performance, and with a range of multi-agency services and support. A national inspection agency, visiting an individual school for a limited period of time cannot understand the local and collaborative context. And we contend cannot then provide more than a superficial assessment based mainly on performance data.

3.5. It is perfectly possible to improve 'the performance of Ofsted', as the select committee is assessing, and still have a deeply inspection unsatisfactory system that undermines the ability of school staff to provide an excellent education to their pupils. Instead it is important to look at the whole picture, how Ofsted, as it currently exists, interacts with the existence of league tables, high stakes examinations, school improvement partners (SIPs), self-evaluation, local authorities and governors. As it is now, we believe that the system requires educators to concentrate on jumping through hoops – be it producing the right data from tests, or 'passing an Ofsted' – ahead of what drives them professionally, and what society demands of them: educating.

3.6. We believe that self-evaluation should drive school improvement¹. It should be frank rather than calculated just for Ofsted. It is right for the self-evaluation form (SEF) to be validated locally and for families of schools to share good practice in self-evaluation. Though many teachers hate the bureaucracy, they welcome the benefits of self-evaluation.² In abolishing the SEF, we are concerned that Michael Gove has set himself a difficult challenge for how to support school self-evaluation. There is a danger that, left to their own devices, some schools will generate systems of self-evaluation which are more bureaucratic than the self-evaluation form.

3.7. We believe that it is vital to consider the interaction of school improvement and accountability. Supportive accountability will encourage schools, colleges and the professionals working within them to be innovative and creative, where punitive accountability measures are seen to limit that capacity.

3.8. We are concerned that within a system of 'independent state schools' the government will require some form of bureaucratic evaluation to monitor quality/consistency of provision. In the absence of Ofsted inspection, this may become a desk-based evaluation of test/exam data, which will provide an extremely limited picture of a school's work and unique circumstances. However, we know that Ofsted inspection has perverse consequences for schools, not least that it causes immense additional and unnecessary paperwork, focuses schools on data rather than education, and narrows curriculum and other opportunities for pupils.

3.9. There is now a large and excessive web of accountability mechanisms and school accountability needs rationalising as a matter of urgency. But this does not mean enhancing the powers of Ofsted. ATL continues to argue that Ofsted inspection of maintained schools is unnecessary as it duplicates a range of accountability and support mechanisms locally and nationally and impacts negatively upon both learners and professionals.

4. Impacts of the inspection process

4.1. While we all want all schools to provide the best possible education for their pupils, the current inspection regime puts huge pressure on schools not judged good or outstanding to teach to a narrow curriculum that will not necessarily develop the skills, attitudes, confidence, and passion for learning which young people need. The centrally-driven accountability system demands that schools act in response to what Ofsted requires. What Ofsted argues are non-compulsory actions – such as written lesson plans – but which they may request to see, are enforced by head teachers and governors hamstrung by fear. Frequently, this is neither in accordance with the needs of every child nor society's expectations of our education system. That Ofsted can essentially dictate so much of what goes on in a school is an uncomfortable truth undermining professionals and ultimately the education

¹ See www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsch/88/8806.htm (part of the previous Select Committee's report into school accountability) for more on the significance of the SEF.

² Over a third of respondents to ATL's 2010 survey of members said the SEF was extremely or very beneficial to them and their school. Less than 6% said it was not useful.

of young people themselves.

4.2. It is hard to put it better than the Children, Schools and Families' Select Committee's 2010 report into school accountability:

"Yet most of those who may wish to use the Tables, particularly parents, remain unaware of the very serious defects associated with them and will interpret the data presented without taking account of their inherent flaws. As a result, many schools feel so constrained by the fear of failure according to the narrow criteria of the Tables that they resort to measures such as teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum, an inappropriate focusing of resources on borderline candidates, and encouraging pupils towards 'easier' qualifications, all in an effort to maximise their performance data. There is an urgent need for the Government to move away from these damaging Achievement and Attainment Tables and towards a system which gives a full and rounded account of a school's provision."

4.3. In our survey of members in summer 2010, 69% of respondents said that Ofsted inspections did not help their school to improve. 76% did not agree that Ofsted inspections supported the raising of attainment of different pupil groups. And 90% stated that Ofsted inspections did not help them to do their job better.

4.4. Over three quarters of respondents reported either a moderate or significant amount of work was given to them 'because Ofsted might visit'. In addition, as many as 1 in 12 described the workload increase as 'unmanageable'. This additional work included:

- * "Unnecessary assessments and paperwork, done 'just in case'"
- * "Increased lesson observations, increased marking burden, increased assessment of students, increased input of data to track students progress"
- * "Additional reports to Governors, evidence forms, work scrutiny, planning scrutiny"
- * "Assessment data updated in at least 3 different formats every review"
- * "Rapid analysis of data. Work with people on the follow on from data. Social cohesion boards in our classroom with regular updates. Regular surveys most of which were analysed in house."
- * "Gathering of evidence"
- * "Lesson plan scrutiny weekly - two meetings a week, data reports six weekly, faculty reports six weekly, reports, reports, reports!"
- * "Display rearrangement"

4.5. Education professionals understand their responsibilities to their pupils and their parents. However, we believe that Ofsted regime impacts negatively on pupils' education and on those who teach. One ATL member, when listing the work justified in pre-emption of an inspection, says, "The thing is all of this seems reasonable and what we should do, but the pace has been relentless and we are exhausted". Another describes the overriding dominance of the expectation of Ofsted inspection: "Since July last year we have had to be Ofsted ready - as they might come at any minute. With constant reminders nearly every morning, this made the whole staff feel stressed and disengaged. Every thing had to be done in this light." Given a list of existing criteria and asked what Ofsted should and shouldn't be

judging, members responding to our survey volunteered staff happiness or wellbeing as an addition.

4.6. On the new framework introduced in the last academic year, one member told us that “The whole process was far more negative than any previous inspection. I have always broadly agreed with previous inspections but not this one. I would rather leave teaching than go through another.” And another put Ofsted into context: “In times where the economy is delicate and lives are stressful, Ofsted inspections are an unnecessary, expensive and stressful part of the system.”

4.7. We believe that the severe negative impacts on both students and staff outweigh any achievement of the government’s desired aims for Ofsted inspections – ostensibly the publication of comparative snapshot judgments.

5. Consistency, quality and performance of Ofsted

5.1. Evidence backs up the view that the focus of Ofsted is wrong, suggesting that approximately 85% of the variation in pupil achievement is due to factors external to the school, such as family background and economic circumstances.³ By putting more emphasis on exam and test results, Ofsted will be holding schools to account for things that are entirely outside their control.

5.2. ATL members are concerned about the abilities of inspection teams. If Ofsted inspections continue, it is essential that inspectors should have excellent knowledge and understanding of the phases that they inspect, particularly in the early years, and preferably based on recent classroom experience, and that they are fully trained in equality and diversity. The select committee report into school accountability earlier this year was clear that “inspectors will need to be highly trained and well qualified if they are to make an accurate evaluation of school provision.”

5.3. Our members are sceptical about the consistency of Ofsted inspections both at the level of individual lesson observations – a snapshot of “20 minutes out of 1000 hours of teaching a year” as one teacher puts it – and at the level of overall judgments, which for many schools have jumped significantly under the most recent framework. Media reports such as that published by *The Daily Telegraph* in April this year⁴, which record schools moving from a provisional assessment of ‘inadequate’ to a judgment of ‘outstanding’ upon publication of the final report, are not reassuring. Anecdotal evidence indicates inconsistency on safeguarding judgments and ATL members at our 2010 annual conference passed a resolution of concern that safeguarding is impacting significantly on the overall judgment received by schools.

5.4. Members retain concerns that Ofsted does not properly account for school intake. ATL is clear that schools who can clearly demonstrate improvement should be able to be judged ‘good’ even if examination results are weaker when compared nationally.

³ See for example Cassen R. & Kingdon G. (2007) *Tackling Low Achievement*, York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

⁴ ‘Inspectors give wrong ratings to schools’: www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/7574833/Inspectors-give-wrong-ratings-to-schools.html

5.5. The impact of Ofsted inspections has obvious immediate consequences for staff and students of a school. However, Ofsted inspection has longer-term consequences when the judgments are used as the basis for other government policy. In particular, we believe that the consistency and credibility of Ofsted judgments is too much in doubt to be used to determine such significant changes as the expansion of Academies, with far-reaching and potentially damaging consequences to young people and to school staff.

6. What is the alternative to Ofsted inspection?

6.1. If Ofsted section 5 inspection is to continue, we believe inspections should be based upon a balance of self-evaluation, inspectors' judgment and data and statistics. Currently, there remains an over-reliance on (often unreliable) data, particularly that from high-stakes exams. Surveyed ATL members believe that the SEF can be the main basis for grading their school, ahead of the inspection team's judgment and with over twice as much support as for data and statistics.

6.2. However, we strongly advocate a shift from national to local accountability for schools.

6.3. We believe that Ofsted should cease to undertake section 5 inspections in favour of a local system of accountability.⁵ In our radical rationalisation of the accountability system, schools would report much more locally, and much less nationally. A reformed SIP would work with local school improvement services, combining inspection and support with the advantage of understanding schools' local context. It is essential that SIPs are a critical friend of the school; nurturing and supportive.

6.4. It is important that there is not a duplication of interests or responsibilities. Ofsted should not be replicating the role of the SIP nor undermining the SIP in the work its inspectors do.

6.5. An effective system would see SIPs able to encourage self-evaluation to be frank and useful, not written simply for Ofsted. SIPs would have a duty to report their evaluation of the SEF against their own ongoing knowledge of the school to the local authority and this would be moderated by Ofsted, who would quality assure all local accountability processes.

6.6. It is not clear in current government proposals how the local authority or its school improvement work will continue. However, we believe it is vital that it does, and that all schools come under a supportive local authority framework.

6.7. School-by-school inspection by Ofsted is unnecessary and would end under our rationalisation. Ofsted could instead focus on strengths such as its useful thematic reports.

⁵ *New accountability for schools* – ATL Position Statement, 2007

7. Conclusion

7.1. ATL hopes the committee does not forget the work of its predecessor. In its first report of 2009/10, into school accountability, the Children, Schools and Families Committee was clear in its caution against 'even greater complexity in an already overly complex system of school accountability and improvement initiatives' and in its support of self-evaluation as a crucial part of school improvement and accountability.

7.2. The committee also states that 'Inspection should be a positive experience, reinforcing good practice and fostering dialogue with schools in relation to areas where further improvement can be made.' We are confident that this is not the case and that the accountability system requires urgent reform. Reform from the national to the local. And reform that amends radically the role of Ofsted, most notably abolishing its school-by-school inspections.

7.3. We continue to believe that the best system of accountability and school improvement is one that works across a local area, supported by the local authority, with a role for Ofsted in moderating local judgments and carrying out thematic reviews. We cannot see how this can operate in a system of Academies, set adrift from the support of local authorities.

7.4. If Ofsted inspection is to continue, this government must commission an independent review to redefine Ofsted's form and function, and rationalise the whole accountability system for schools.