**Transforming Inspection for Good**

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How do we truly measure quality and foster genuine improvement, especially in something as absolutely crucial as education? It's a question that really dogs, policymakers, educators, parents, everyone, really, it's about our kids' future. Absolutely. So today we're taking a deep dive into, well, the fascinating and often pretty contentious world of educational inspection here in England.

That's right. And our mission for this deep dive is to unpack a really compelling critique of the current system, Ofsted, and then explore a frankly radical and detailed proposal for something different. It's called Transforming Inspection for Good, and it comes from inspectforgood.co.uk. We've waded through a stack of sources, research papers, expert notes, to basically bring you the core arguments, the innovative ideas, and yeah, some surprising facts, sort of a shortcut to understanding this whole critical debate.

Okay. So the big question then is, why? Why is this transformation apparently so urgently needed? What are the breakdowns in the current system? Well, one of the first things that jumps out from the sources when you look at the numbers is this kind of disconnect. Disconnect.

How so? Between the reported ratings and the, let's say, the reality of educational achievement. So you hear that average Ofsted ratings for schools are apparently getting higher. Okay.

Sounds good on the surface. Right. But then you look at international test results, like PISA, that's for 15-year-olds in reading, math, science, and for England, they've actually flatlined, just stayed level.

Flatlined. Despite better Ofsted grades. That doesn't quite add up, does it? It really doesn't.

And the insight coming straight from the sources we looked at is maybe, just maybe, people are just getting better at responding to inspection. So gaming the system almost, or teaching to the test perhaps. Could be.

It suggests the system might be incentivising a performance for the inspection rather than deep, real improvement in learning itself. Right. And there was this other claim, you might have heard it, from the ~~PeerLRS~~ PIRLS results in 2021, that's the big international reading study.

Oh, yeah. The best readers in the Western world thing. That's the one.

But our sources actually correct this. They point out the data for England was collected a year late because of, well, you know. Pandemic, presumably.

Right. And the score itself is actually one point lower than back in 2016. So not quite the triumphant headline it seemed.

What does that discrepancy really tell us then? Is it just like spin or something deeper about how we measure progress? It certainly points to a potential misalignment, doesn't it, between the metrics Ofsted uses and actual learning outcomes. And beyond the numbers, there's this really significant human cost that often gets linked to the current system. Our sources talk a lot about this claim that Ofsted creates a culture of fear.

Fear rather than trust. I've heard that before. Exactly.

And this is where it gets quite stark, actually. Stress from Ofsted inspections has even been cited as a factor in the deaths of 10 teachers. 10.

Good grief. That's truly sobering. It really underscores the kind of pressure involved.

It really does. And the worry is that current inspections or planned changes will only increase that stress, pile onto already heavy workloads, and just foster more resistance to what some sources call these unreliable two-day inspections. Unreliable.

Yeah. Okay. And does the evidence Ofsted uses hold up? Well, that's another point of contention.

We found this quite striking detail. And there was a report suggesting that special measures, you know, when a school is deemed failing. Right.

Needs major intervention. That report suggested special measures were actually beneficial. But our sources argued this was based on a statistical blunder.

A blunder. Seriously. Apparently so.

And that, in reality, being put in special measures actually led to lower student recruitment, fewer resources, and real difficulty attracting and keeping good teachers and senior staff. Why? Because of the, quote, public humiliation. Wow.

[The statistical blunder was that the universal phenomenon “regression to the mean” was completely ignored in the analysis.]

That just completely flips the narrative, doesn't it? Public humiliation instead of support. Exactly. Makes you question the whole foundation.

And I suppose personal stories back this up. I mean, beyond the statistics. Oh, definitely.

We saw anecdotes like one head teacher who said 30 percent of a draft Ofsted report was removed because it was inaccurate. 30 percent. But the final judgement stayed the same.

The inspectors apparently just refused to consider all evidence. That sounds incredibly frustrating. Just sticking to their guns regardless.

And another school, they got judged good, which sounds fine, right? Yeah, good is good. But the staff felt deflated. No real targets to aim for.

And the example given was an inspector focussing on whether one child wrote the word because correctly in two history essays. Because as a key indicator. That seems almost trivial, arbitrary even.

It points to what the critics call these deep-seated systemic methodological flaws. The core argument from the people proposing the alternative is basically that Ofsted's approach over 30 years has failed to increase achievements. Thirty years is a long time for a system not to deliver on its main goal.

Quite. And when you look at the mechanics, Ofsted's toolkits, for instance, they're described as having excessive and labyrinthine expectations. Labyrinthine.

Yeah. Like a maze. Exactly.

Picture this. The school's toolkit is 30 pages long with 330 different expectations listed. 330.

How can anyone keep track of that? Well, precisely. And apparently a professional needs to meet 100 specific standards just to get the middle grade of secure. A hundred standards just for OPS [?].

Yeah. And the sources suggest this gives too much scope for inspectors to find causes for concern. It's almost like they're set up to find fault, you know.

It sounds like you'd spend all your time prepping for the inspection, not actually, you know, teaching or leading. That's the fear. And the critique goes further.

If just one standard out of, say, 38 in an area like developing teaching raises a concern. Just one. The whole area might get slapped with the lowest grades.

Like, imagine building this intricate model and one tiny piece is slightly off, so the whole thing's declared a failure. That sounds disproportionate. Creates enormous pressure to just tick boxes, maybe.

Not innovate. Exactly. And then there's the issue of fairness and equality.

The data on inequalities is pretty stark. That gap in GCSE results between kids eligible for free school meals and those who aren't. Yeah.

It's basically stayed the same, constant over time, despite decades of inspection. So the system isn't closing the gap for disadvantaged students. Doesn't appear to be.

And connecting this to a wider picture, there's this excerpt from David Gilbourne's book that's quite telling. He notes that neither Black Caribbean nor Gipsy, Roma and Traveller children have ever achieved on par with their white British peers. Right.

That gap is known. Yet, white students are apparently at least ten times more likely to be singled out for discussion in Ofsted's main annual report. Ten times more likely.

Even though other groups have bigger achievement gaps. That seems odd, misplaced focus, perhaps. It raises questions, certainly.

And all of this, all these criticisms, lead to that core argument from the reformers. The leopard does not change its spots. Meaning Ofsted can't fundamentally reform itself? That's the suggestion.

That tinkering won't work. And a radical alternative is what's needed. Okay.

Well, given all those reasons, those pretty compelling arguments for change, the obvious next question is, what would a better alternative actually look like? Exactly. And this is where InspectForGood.co.uk comes in with their vision. Right.

Tell us about the people behind it first. Who are they? The driving forces are two emeritus professors of education, Frank ~~Caulfield~~ Coffield and Peter ~~Thames~~ Tymms. Emeritus professors, so experienced academics.

Deeply experienced. And their motivation seems quite personal, actually. Peter ~~Thames~~ Tymms, one of them, was apparently exasperated by an inspection at a school where he was a governor.

Exasperated. Why? He found the advice given woeful, lacking sensitivity, lacking an evidence base, just not helpful. Okay.

And Frank ~~Caulfield~~ Coffield, the other professor, he'd actually written a whole book called Will the Leopard Change Its Spots?, proposing a new model, sent it to Ofsted, and it had no impact. Didn't lead to change. So you can see the frustration building there.

So they decided to build their own alternative. What's the core idea? The core proposal is quite clever, actually. It's a research design.

They want to set up an alternative inspection system that runs in parallel with Ofsted. In parallel, not replacing it straight away. Not straight away.

The idea is to run it in one substantial geographical area of England for five years. A five-year pilot project in one region. Exactly.

They frame it as an evidence-based way to implementing policy. So you run the two systems side by side, you monitor the impacts of both. Compare the results.

And see what works better, identify better ways forward based on actual evidence from the comparison. Okay. That sounds sensible.

A controlled experiment, almost. Yeah. So what's this alternative system built on? What are its foundations? It's built on what they call 10 pillars of good inspection.

10 pillars. Okay. And these are just vague principles.

They're meant to be a blueprint for a whole different approach, shifting from, you know, fear to partnership. Right. Can we walk through some of those pillars? What's pillar one? Pillar one is about purpose.

The whole point is to enhance the quality of learning everywhere and improve the system overall, not just judge schools. Enhance learning. Okay, makes sense.

What's next? Second is methodology. It has to be based on proper, established, mixed methods research. Validity is key.

Providing real evidence for decisions. So robust methods, not just tick boxes. Got it.

Pillar three. Trust and support. This is crucial.

Inspectors need to gain trust. How? By celebrating successes, but also offering genuine support where there are shortcomings. And crucially, considering the local context, resources, location, the school's specific culture.

Celebrating success and offering support. That sounds very different from the public humiliation you mentioned earlier. Completely different philosophy.

Which leads to number four. Dialogue and shared learning. Inspection becomes a shared task.

Both sides, inspectors and the school, learn from it. That way, everyone's more committed to the recommendations. A partnership, really.

Both sides learning. Exactly. And fifth, it has to be humane, effective, and inclusive.

Valuing everyone's well-being. Teachers, staff, students. Humane is a word you don't often associate with inspection regimes.

What about the inspectors themselves? Pillar six. Right. Inspector experience.

This is key. Inspectors must have direct, recent experience of the kind of place they're inspecting. The setting, the age group, the subject.

Ah. So no generic inspectors dropping in without understanding the specifics. That addresses a common complaint.

Precisely. Then seventh, fairness. An equitable complaints procedure.

Really important. With an independent adjudicator who can actually overturn judgments if they're unfair. Independent oversight.

Checks and balances. Good. Number eight.

Evaluation. The system itself needs to be evaluated. Independent research looking at the short-term and long-term impacts.

Continuous improvement baked in. So the inspectorate gets inspected, in a way. You could say that.

It learns and adapts. Ninth is transparency and collaboration. Principles, practises, all public.

Reports show the methods used. And all the main partners, staff, parents, governors, the community, they're involved in finalising the findings. Everyone involved.

That sounds like it would build trust, wouldn't it? That's the idea. Build trust through openness. And finally, pillar ten is self-improvement.

The inspectorate itself is committed to getting better using research, feedback, independent evaluation. Okay, those ten pillars paint a picture of a radically different system. Trust, support, collaboration, evidence.

It's a comprehensive framework, and it lays the groundwork for how it would actually operate day to day. Right. So, with those guiding principles clear, how does it actually work? How does this philosophy translate into a practical inspection process on the ground? Well, they propose a peer-to-peer inspection model.

Peer-to-peer. So, schools inspecting other schools. Essentially, yes.

A head teacher and a small team from one school act as inspectors for another school. And then, in turn, that school inspects another one down the line. Interesting.

Like a reciprocal arrangement. Yeah. The idea is it promotes sharing best practise constructive feedback between peers who understand the challenges.

And the sources mention this isn't totally new. Similar approaches have apparently been tried in the past and found to be very effective. Okay, so there's some precedent.

What makes this version unique? A key part is the concept of critical friends. Critical friends. Sounds a bit contradictory.

Maybe. But the idea is constructive. Inspectors celebrate the strengths, but they also identify any serious problems.

Okay. What happens if they do find serious problems? Right. This is where it gets interesting.

Finding serious problems triggers a second visit. But this time, it's from a quite different head, plus a small group. Completely separate team.

A second opinion, basically. Yeah. A blind review.

Exactly. And action is only taken if this blind second set of inspectors identifies the same serious problems. Ah.

So it requires confirmation from two independent peer teams before triggering major interventions. That sounds much more robust. Much more.

And it allows the dialogue, as they put it, to go beyond comfortable conversations. To allow for proper challenge, support, disagreement even, not just consensus. Real honest feedback.

Not just papering over cracks. What about parents, though? ~~AUSTED~~ Ofsted always says it provides vital information for parents. How does this model handle that? The proposal claims parents will get higher quality and more reliable information.

Higher quality. How? An online report will state clearly if a school is considered exceptional or simply good overall. Straightforward.

Okay. But what about schools that aren't good? The ones with problems? Right. For that small proportion where there are problems, there will be no online rating given.

No rating. So no public label of failing or requires improvement. Exactly.

No public humiliation label. Instead, the focus shifts immediately. Support will be offered to address and solve those problems.

Help, not just judgement. That's a huge shift. Focussing on fixing the problem rather than labelling the school.

So accountability with support. That's the aim. Consequences if things aren't up to scratch, yes, leading to improvements for the kids.

But, and this is key, not to the detriment of the psychological well-being of staff. Balancing accountability with well-being. That sounds like a healthier approach.

How? The elephant in the room, perhaps. Money. How could this possibly be financially feasible? You said it claims to be cost neutral.

Yeah. That's the claim. Cost neutral.

That sounds almost too good to be true for such a big change. How could that possibly work? Well, the key takeaway from the sources is this. They argue the pro rata savings from basically stopping Ofsted in that one pilot area.

Right. The money saved from not running Ofsted there. That saving will be more than sufficient to set up and run our new alternative inspection system for five years.

Sufficient? How? Where do the savings come from? The big saving, they say, is cutting out Ofsted's top-heavy hierarchical structure. They mention Ofsted having 29 senior managers, all on large salaries. Ah.

Trimming the bureaucracy at the top. That seems to be the main idea. In contrast, the new peer inspectors, the heads and their teams, they won't get a salary for inspecting.

They'll get an honorarium, a sort of professional fee plus travel expenses, and their own schools get reimbursed for the cost of replacing them while they're out inspecting. So paying practitioners directly for their time and expertise rather than funding a large central management structure. Seems to be the model.

They also mention needing money for honoraria, travel, and subsistence for a three-member advisory board meeting once a year for five years. Okay, this advisory board. That sounds important for oversight.

What's its role? It's crucial for accountability. A small group, just three national and international evaluation experts. Their job is to oversee the whole pilot study, make sure it's running properly and independently.

Who would be on it? They suggest members would be chosen for specific expertise like in preschool or further education. Just as examples, they mentioned maybe Jane Perryman from the team that wrote Beyond ~~Austed~~ Ofsted for England. Okay, familiar with that critique.

Maybe an expert from Finland's evaluation centre or the chief inspector from the Netherlands. People with real evaluation chops [?]. And importantly.

Importantly, they stress these members would be neither personal friends nor former colleagues of the main proposers. Ensuring genuine independence. A strong commitment to impartiality and critical oversight there.

It certainly seems so. And look, this proposal isn't just some academic paper gathering dust. It seems to be gaining real traction.

Traction, how so? Well, the Inspect for Good website itself is apparently getting increasing support from actual practising teachers across the country. Grassroots interest. Okay.

And it's not just teachers. Respected figures like Colin Richards, another education expert, called the proposal a genuinely interesting idea. So it's being taken seriously in education circles.

Seems like it. And this feeling is mirrored in wider surveys. There was this alternative Big Listen survey.

It found a striking 80% 18-hando [?], zero of respondents felt ~~Austed's~~ Ofsted’s own proposed changes were either largely unfit for purpose or completely unfit for purpose. 80% unhappy with ~~Austed's~~ Ofsted’s own reforms. It's huge.

Shows a real appetite for something different. A massive mandate for change, you could argue. And this groundswell seems to be reaching political ears, too.

Oh, politicians are noticing. Apparently so. Frank ~~Caulfield~~ Coffield and Peter ~~Thames~~ Tymms actually went to a Labour Party dinner.

They spoke directly to the ~~shadow~~ ~~c~~Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves, and the ~~shadow education secretary~~ Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Philipson, about their campaign. Wow. Straight to the top decision makers, potentially.

How was it received? They reported that their message appeared to be welcome, especially, perhaps unsurprisingly, the suggestion that their alternative could actually save money. The cost-neutral aspect definitely helps. You'd think so.

And their local MP, Mary Foy, invited them to provide more details. So political doors seem to be opening, at least a crack. Interesting.

And this is all happening while ~~Austed~~ Ofsted itself is under pressure. Absolutely. The timing is significant.

Recent headlines have been full of it. ~~Austed's~~ Ofsted’s chief had to apologise for giving very short notice about new inspections. Rights that caused uproar.

Unions are demanding delays to reforms until September 2026. Head teachers are threatening to quit as ~~Austed~~ Ofsted inspectors. Wow.

Even their own inspectors. Yeah. And the NAHT teaching union has launched legal action against ~~Austed~~ Ofsted.

It's a whole storm of pressure. So lots of other activity pushing for change, too. Definitely.

Letters to the new chair of ~~Austed~~ Ofsted, supportive articles from groups like NA~~I~~HT, the National Association for the Teaching of English, an all-party parliamentary group getting involved, reports with titles like, turning school inspections toxic. It's coming from many angles. And ~~Austed's~~ Ofsted’s response? Well, one notable thing was the announcement of delay.

They pushed back, releasing the results of their own consultation until September. So the whole system is clearly under immense scrutiny right now. Pressure cooker stuff.

OK, so we've really explored a powerful tension here, haven't we? On one side, the current system, ~~Austed~~ Ofsted, with its perceived failures in actually raising standards and this heavy toll on staff well-being. And on the other side, this detailed alternative proposal, Inspect for Good, built on trust, evidence, collaboration, and claiming to be cost neutral. Yeah.

And a core insight, I think, from digging into the sources is how Inspect for Good isn't just proposing a different set of procedures. It's a fundamentally different philosophy. It's about moving away from that culture of fear, of sort of punitive accountability towards one based on mutual trust, shared learning, and genuine, continuous improvement.

For the kids, yes, but also for the staff delivering the education. It's a holistic view. A different way of thinking about improvement altogether.

So considering everything we've dived into today, what makes an inspection system effective, but also humane? What larger lessons, perhaps, can you, listening, draw from this about how we evaluate complex human stuff, whether it's education or business or even things in our own lives? How do we evaluate to truly foster improvement, not just enforce accountability? That's a deep question. Something to definitely think about as you go about your day.