The past and uncertain present of inspection in England

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An exploration of key developments in the history of inspection in England, drawing attention to changes over time.

We explore the relationship between changing models of inspection and changing politics and practices of governing schooling.

We are interested in the future of inspection and its role in governing complex, diverse systems.
A national inspection of education has been a major feature of the English system of education for nearly 140 years. National inspectors have visited schools, written reports on schools, and written national reports on the condition of education. They have always been significant for teachers, schools and local authorities.

- How has inspection survived? And how has it changed? What is its role?
- The paradox – it is a permanent presence, but it changes: its personnel, its objects and its practices;
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Stages

- Inspectors were a key part of the administrative structure [reporting up and inspecting down]; they validated schools and teachers; supplemented by a large group of local authority inspectors;
- They were then re-organized [in the 1980s] into a large campaigning organization, based on close observation and reporting of schools and draconian powers (from ‘naming and shaming’ to school closure);
- They are increasingly sub-contracted inspectors.

Tools

- Past – mainly observation; experience; education and trust based;
- Present – mainly template schedules; allied to growing data expertise.
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- The schooling system has never been described without reference to the constancy and power of the inspectors. They have a crucial role in defining the work of education and reporting on it to government. The system was always legitimated by the professional quality, omnipresence and invisibility of the inspectors.

- But key elements in the inspection service have changed radically in different periods, depending on redefined tasks and organisational location, and significant changes in the governing of education:
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**What is it becoming?**

- A new distance – public agency, directly accountable, with private company operations
- Within a consumer based model
- Within an unsettled system of schooling
- Refocused on school performance and pupil behaviour
- Threatened by the digitization and flow of school data
- Losing legitimacy to efficiency of market forces in governing education

*Governing by Inspection: School Inspection and Education Governance in Scotland, England and Sweden*