

Response by Sean Harford HMI to Tom Sherrington's blog: *OfSTED Outstanding? Just gimme some truth, 30 Dec 2014*

Following Tom Sherrington's blog posted near the end of 2014, I was asked by @EllenerLaura if I had read the blog, to which I replied: 'I have read this. I can't agree with much of what he says, but Tom makes some valid points very passionately.'

This was followed up by @primarypundit who asked me which points I thought were valid.

I have set out my thoughts below on the points he raises.

Happy New Year to everybody!

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OfSTED Outstanding? Just gimme some truth.

POSTED BY [TOM SHERRINGTON](#) · DECEMBER 30, 2014

*I'm sick and tired of hearing things
From uptight, short-sighted, narrow-minded hypocritics*

All I want is the truth

Just gimme some truth

*I've had enough of reading things
By neurotic, psychotic, pig-headed politicians*

All I want is the truth

Just gimme some truth

*I'm sick to death of seeing things
From tight-lipped, condescending, mamas little chauvinists*

All I want is the truth

Just gimme some truth now

*I've had enough of watching scenes
Of schizophrenic, ego-centric, paranoiac, prima-donnas*

All I want is the truth now

Just gimme some truth

*No short-haired, yellow-bellied, son of tricky dicky
Is gonna mother hubbard soft soap me*

***With just a pocketful of hope
Its money for dope
Money for rope***

Ok, so John Lennon wasn't talking about OfSTED inspections, the farce of grading schools or the tendency for educational complexity to be brushed under the carpet of simplicity, as if everyone is too stupid to understand.

But the chorus kind of works doesn't it? ***Just Gimme Some Truth!!***

Well it does if, like me, your idea of 'truth' is something that encompasses the real complexity of the notions of educational standards, quality, school effectiveness, leadership, attainment, progress and so on.

As I've said before, fundamentally I reject the idea that schools can be judged in a meaningful way via inspections. By 'judged', I am not talking about an experienced visitor giving some insightful developmental feedback based on an analysis of the available data and their observations; no doubt, there are some people out there who can do this well enough.

Sean Harford (SH): Schools HMI are highly-trained, former teachers with wide-ranging experience of education. So I agree that it is absolutely possible for HMI through inspection to provide such developmental feedback from the practice of analysis, discussion with the school's staff and observations around the school. I think it's the issue of providing grades that Tom takes issue with. This is where 'accountability' comes in and we need to consider the wider audience for inspection: of course the school's leadership and other staff are an important part of that audience, but just as (arguably more) importantly are the parents/carers and pupils, and to another extent all taxpayers and government. Providing points for improvement only would not give the level of accountability that all parts of the audience accept as sufficient.

I am talking about the process of distilling this mass of qualitative and quantitative information into a simple set of final grades, with one overall Judgement Grade. The extent to which we accept this in our system despite the enormous flaws and the absence of proper validity trials continues to astonish me.

SH: I agree that Ofsted has not done enough in the past to test the reliability of inspection; we have concentrated on quality assurance. This provides assurance that the process is carried out consistently as we would wish, but not directly that different inspectors in the school on the same day would give the same judgement. I have built in reliability testing for the pilots for the new short inspections this term. If reliability is a problem, we will review the issues to see what we need to do to make the inspections reliable.

The data delusions that underpin RAISEOnline hold sway where they have no right to and the complex truth of how good a school is continues to be reduced to the absurd simplicity of two or three data points. At the end, we get told that School X is Good. School Y is Outstanding. School Z Requires Improvement. It's like we've been overrun by The Emperor's New Scientologists and Homeopaths but everyone's too scared to say anything.

SH: I agree that some inspectors and some schools focus too much on a narrow range of data. I say some inspectors and some schools because this cuts both ways: some schools focus on single outcome measures and ignore the bigger picture, as have some weak inspectors. Published data should only ever be a 'signpost' for the school/inspectors to consider what they may be telling us, not the pre-determined 'destination'. This is how we train inspectors and how the vast majority use data, but the weakest ones have been guilty of using the published data as a safety net for not making fully-rounded, professional judgements based on the school's own information, work in books/folders over time, progress seen across year groups/classes, the attitudes to learning of pupils, improvements to teaching following focused CPD etc.

We are working hard to have the best inspectors for our new way of operating from September 2015: HMI, great serving practitioners and the best of the current Additional Inspectors.

Why am I bothered right now? Three reasons.

1. Getting ready for the term ahead, I've been analysing my school's RAISEOnline and, after I suspend disbelief and start working within the (slightly bonkers) framework of convoluted algorithms, it's a complicated story. Some areas are Green; some are White and one or two are Blue. Our figures for Disadvantaged Pupils are strong – mostly Green. Despite being well below national average on raw overall outcomes, the cohort was 70% disadvantaged with a low entry profile and VA is very strong. You see, it's a complex picture. I'm starting to think about the likely inspection this term and our SEF and I'm not sure what line to take. We'll probably go for 'Good'. It's a 'best fit'. But what's that about? Why should we need to find a best fit? Why can't we tell our complicated story? Who benefits from reducing it all to a one-word descriptor? I can't think of a good reason to do it.

SH: I agree: if your self-evaluation process does not benefit from you grading yourself in the final analysis, then why do it? That's not at all to say, 'don't bother self-evaluating' – and I know Tom isn't saying that here. Just as inspection reports' main audience are probably parents/carers and pupils, the audience for a school's self-evaluation should primarily be the leadership and staff because it should identify what they need to do to improve things for the pupils. If the SLT's judgement is that their school will respond better and more effectively if the self-evaluation is not graded, then that's their judgement. If the analysis is sharp, evidence-based and identifies the key areas of strength and for improvement, I agree, why grade if that's right for your school? The self-evaluation should be a catalyst for improvement.

2. One thing I love about my school is that there's a certain healthy fatigue about talking things up the whole time; that's the old regime. Now we'd rather focus on real improvement and telling it how it is.

SH: I agree entirely with this, and inspectors would rather be told the truth and what the school is doing to tackle issues than have things masked in some way. Telling it (accurately) how it is will reflect well on the leadership and management.

But, to be absolutely honest, the OfSTED Handbook is making me think bad thoughts. I've started tarting my school up in my mind as those 'Outstanding' descriptors tempt me with their promises of glory and public acclaim. I'm starting to have mock conversations in my head with Phantom Inspectors and finding that I'm less honest than I should be. I'm spinning a story, putting on some gloss, papering over the cracks, hiding my dirty linen.....this is all WRONG!. I would love to have a frank exchange based on my detailed knowledge of my school so that the inspection would help me do my job – but when these people arrive for real, I won't know them, I won't trust them (how could I?), the stakes will be high for the school and I will tell *little LIES!* I can see it coming. What kind of system is this? I'll be torn between giving a nuanced story of strengths and areas for improvement and putting on a show to get the best overall grade we can – which will matter (too much) to parents and others looking in from the outside.

3. I met a good friend today who is also a Head. He's been burned so badly in the last 12 months it makes me angry. His school went from Good to 'Serious Weaknesses' based on one year's outcomes in one subject and an inspection that took place on the day of their biggest ever community event with hundreds of visitors. The inspection team included someone who wouldn't shake hands with women (for religious reasons) and someone who didn't understand the Sixth Form data. They didn't listen to the Head at the time but the recent RAISE based on the most recent results (the results they were working towards at the time of the inspection) is Green all over – *in every area*. The school never had serious weaknesses; the inspection was Wrong. The judgement will remain in place until another inspection; they will claim that the inspection kicked the school into gear and delivered a good outcome but this will be a delusion.

SH: I agree that if this is actually the case then this would be wrong – not the thing about the community event, as inspectors seeing such events are helpful, not a hindrance, especially when considering the curriculum and SMSC - but if the school went from G2 to G4 on the single basis of one year's data in one subject when everything else remained good, then I will look into this – please give me the details and I will follow up.

It's worth noting that the new short inspections for G2 schools from September 2015 will not make all the section 5 judgements. The report/letter will say whether the school has maintained its overall good performance and focus on whether the leadership and management have demonstrated the capacity for sustained improvement. In this way, they will be less 'cliff-edged'.

The results were on the way anyway – and the inspection got in the way, doing significant harm to the school's reputation and to my friend's health and self-esteem. He was crushed by it – and he's a strong person. The nonsense is real – it has teeth. There are still teams of Sons of Tricky Dicky out there doing harm to people in the name of accountability; people who barely understand the term 'confidence interval' and actually think that 'levels of progress' is something you can measure with the accuracy of a ruler. It's got to stop!

Take a look at these descriptors from the Inspection Handbook:

Outstanding (1)

- Teaching is outstanding and, together with a rich, relevant, broad and balanced curriculum, contributes to outstanding learning and achievement, significant growth in pupils' knowledge, and excellent attitudes to learning. Exceptionally, achievement may be good and rapidly improving.
- Pupils and particular groups of pupils have excellent educational experiences at school and these ensure that they are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
- There is excellent practice that ensures that all pupils have high levels of literacy and mathematical knowledge, understanding and skills appropriate to their age.⁴¹
- The school's practice consistently reflects the highest expectations of staff and the highest aspirations for pupils, including the most able, disabled pupils and those with special educational needs.
- Best practice is spread effectively in a drive for continuous improvement.
- Other principal aspects of the school's work are good or outstanding.
- The school's thoughtful and wide-ranging promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and their physical well-being enables them to thrive in a supportive, highly cohesive learning community.

Good (2)

- Pupils benefit from teaching that is at least good. This leads to substantial growth in pupils' knowledge, promotes very positive attitudes to learning and ensures that pupils are achieving well.
- Pupils and particular groups of pupils have highly positive educational experiences at school that ensure that they are well prepared for the next stage in their education, training or employment.
- Pupils' progress is not held back by an inability to read accurately and fluently, or to use their mathematical knowledge, understanding and skills effectively. Those pupils who have fallen behind are being helped to make substantial and sustained progress in their reading.
- The school takes effective action to enable most pupils, including the most able, disabled pupils and those with special educational needs, to reach their potential.
- Other principal aspects of the school's work are likely to be at least good.
- Deliberate and effective action is taken to create a cohesive learning community through the promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, and their physical well-being. There is a positive climate for learning.

If I rate my school against them, I could pick out bits from each box that apply. I could probably find some areas that actually Require Improvement. What's the value in averaging it all out into a single grade? Why not simply list the statements that apply – assuming that the linguistic/semantic differences are enough to be sufficiently meaningful for the judgements to be made in the first place? Why on Earth did anyone suggest the idea that it was helpful or meaningful to draw a line between Good and Outstanding and give it VALUE.? And why do we

continue to accept it? I know two London schools (from the inside) where recent inspections came down on opposite sides of this artificial line. The truth? The Outstanding school really isn't; the Good school was probably short-changed. That's my truth. Obviously, both are on a continuum; both schools are on a journey of improvement – the G/O grade is utterly inadequate as a tool to capture the issues in those schools. The O school is more complacent than it should be; the G school has wasted energy picking people up after a bruising downgrading.

What would the 'Gimme some truth' version of all this look like? Well, I'd suggest a few things:

1. Get rid of the whole idea of grades and report inspection outcomes in the form of areas of strength and priorities for improvement. An Inadequate grade could remain if this was based on a much longer and deeper inspection process; beyond that – it's just untenable (and I say this knowing there is widespread, passive acceptance of grading).

SH: See above: I get this from the school's point of view, but the wider accountability issues need to be considered.

2. Report the data outcomes in a detailed data report that includes much of the RAISE Online profiling – with as much complexity as necessary and no less. Schools could update their online Data Profile annually immediately after each set of results – instead of waiting until December.

SH: This would be helpful, although of course most schools do this with their own internal data so they can work on issues right away, as well as if an inspection happens.

3. Introduce a School Response section to be written by the Head and Chair of Governors, published with the report. This would give due weight to the school's Self Evaluation; if the inspectors disagree with the school, the school could still assert its position with reasons, especially in the many cases when inspectors simply arrive looking to find the evidence they need to back-up the judgement they've already decided on from the data. It would also allow the school space to cite any procedural concerns about the conduct of the inspection itself – instead of the Kafkaesque complaints process that is often too slow and too late to prevent damage being done. (As reported by several colleagues in recent years.)

SH: This sounds interesting and in the digital age I don't know why schools couldn't do this on their own website anyway. Schools could put their response (presumably agreed by all members of staff/governors?) next to the link to the inspection report. It wouldn't work if it was something Ofsted insisted on (charges of creating further bureaucracy), but why not do it if schools want to?

4. Ensure that at least one member of the inspection team is someone who actually knows the school on the basis of regular visits and interactions. There are some elements of the framework that simply cannot be delivered in two days with any credible level of validity.

SH: This is similar to the 'nominee' in our Further Education & Skills inspections, but while they contribute evidence in a way, they do not contribute to judgements. The inclusion of the school's SLT (and at the very least the HT) in inspection meetings currently provides a similar role in schools now. I can see some merit in what Tom is saying here, but the problem could be objectivity/conflict of interest.

Here is an example:

153. Inspectors should consider how effectively pupils are grouped within lessons and across year groups. For example:

- where pupils are taught in mixed ability groups/classes, inspectors will consider whether the most able are stretched and the least able are supported sufficiently to reach their full potential
- where pupils are taught in sets, inspectors will consider how leaders ensure that pupils in lower sets are not disadvantaged or that teachers take into account that pupils within a set may still have very different needs.

I'd argue that it is

literally impossible to 'consider' this meaningfully during an inspection. There simply isn't time to identify whether there is a causal link between outcomes and classroom practice in this area. It's false to suggest otherwise – and yet there it is alongside many other similar 'Inspectors should' statements that cannot be actioned without making a giant guess.

5. Begin every inspection with a meeting to establish the terms of reference and the code of conduct for all parties.

SH: There is already a meeting at the outset of the inspection to establish these things.

During this meeting, a Head could establish the intellectual credibility of the team members, their knowledge of assessment systems and issues of data validity, their understanding of the terms Good and Outstanding as applied to teaching and their understanding of the limits of all the evidence at their disposal – before anyone goes any further. Of course this exchange might cut both ways but I think we're entitled to know who we're dealing with when the stakes are so high.

SH: I have resisted thus far identifying the things I disagree with Tom on in this blog as that wasn't what I was asked to comment on. However, I have to baulk at this one: considering what Tom has said above about what it is/isn't possible for a team of trained, experienced HMI to assess over a two day period with prior analysis of some important data, I am just not sure how the headteacher would assess the 'intellectual credibility' of the inspection team in such an initial meeting.

Is there hope? We'll see.

Meanwhile, I'll need to play the system the way it is. Those inspectors had better know their stuff – because we will be on it like they won't believe! It's our agenda, not theirs and I'm not having my teachers dance to any tune but our own. **SH: I couldn't agree more!**