

Seeking to Establish a Better Balance between the Technical and Social Aspects of Assessment Practices in the English Inspection System; Aiming for a Community of Evaluation Practice

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Abstract

This article highlights the need for a better balance between the technical and social aspects of assessment in the English inspection system of state schools. The author compares the theoretical belief that underpins current assessment practice with that which would need to be given more credence if teachers and inspectors are to become part of the same community of practice. This focus is seen as relevant at a time when inspection is once again under scrutiny following the death of a headteacher after a critical OFSTED judgement. Although it is understandable that teachers' reaction to this news is to call for the abandonment of inspections an alternative scenario is offered that might allow all those involved in and with schools to become more equal partners in the evaluation process. By considering the different participants in terms of their "figured worlds" and introducing the concept of "roles by metaphor" as part of the feedback process the author offers a non-confrontational means of opening a meaningful dialogue between inspectors and teachers with the intention of improving pupil learning and teacher planning. For this model to be effective teachers must change role from delivery person to coach or scaffolder to allow pupils to change role from in attendance to absorbent recipient for example or metacognitive reflector. Similarly, inspectors will need to cease exerting power over teachers by changing role from judge to critical friend to communicate more effectively and lessen tension. Examples of how pedagogy and critical and social aspects of assessment affect pupil motivation, love of learning, independent thinking and grasp of subject matter are drawn from the writer's experience of being part of the English state education system as a pupil, teacher, inspector, and researcher over the period 1949-2023 before sharing what happened when an inspection team trialled "roles by

metaphor” during a sixth form inspection.

Keywords

OFSTED, Formative Assessment, Summative Assessment Behaviourism, Socio-Cultural Theory, Systems-Rationalism, Subjectivist-Interpretivist, Figured Worlds, Roles by Metaphor, Community of Practice, Gatekeepers, Classroom Talk

1. Introduction

The ideas shared here developed and entered my practice as an inspector/researcher after attending a presentation given by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (BERA, Cardiff, 2000). At this conference Wiliam outlined his thoughts for developing a theory of formative assessment. Having just completed doctoral research in this field I agreed with his views that assessment for learning in the “figured world” (Holland et al., 1998) of the classroom is of prime importance but at the same time was equally frustrated by my observations and understanding that full implementation of this assessment is limited if inhabitants of other “figured worlds” who exert pressure over schools do not fully understand the complexity of the subject under consideration. I refer to politicians, school inspectors, parents, employers, school governors etc.

Wiliam explained the term “figured world” as

...we mean a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which characters and actors are recognised, significance is attached to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by a set of agents... we engage in a limited range of meaningful acts or changes of state... as moved by a specific set of forces (Holland et al., 1998: p. 52).

The concept outlined above is particularly useful when considering the tensions existing between inspection and teaching pedagogy. As adults we all inhabit many “figured worlds” which support but often limit our understanding of other worlds beyond our direct experience. Our worlds are often dominated by forces beyond our immediate control and these forces often adversely affect either our understanding or our capability to act differently from the norm at that time. One such force, which I recognised as prevalent and having a major impact on both teachers’ and inspectors’ “figured worlds” was the way government initiatives had concentrated minds on assessment as a “technical craft,” by emphasizing the value of tests and league tables of test results. The publication of these comparative league tables supposedly functioned as a spur between individuals and institutions in the pursuit of improvement (Broadfoot, 1999). In my experience, improvement in test results resulting from teaching to the test or even teaching the test have proved of limited value in encouraging learning at a deeper level by persuading pupils to take responsibility for their own actions (Burke,

2011: pp. 19-24). I know deep learning is not always appropriate, but neither is being tightly controlled by tests and subjected to a narrow curriculum. I would argue that Government agencies in the pursuit of improving standards have ignored the social dimensions of assessment, which could be used to aid learning (Lyons et al., 1993). Assessment as evident in National testing for example, is designed to find out what the pupils do not know and is therefore essentially punitive. The designers of this form of assessment allow the public to assume that tests are “neutral” measures, which only require further technical skills to make them more effective. Those who adopt a constructivist view of assessment know that this is far from the truth and that assessment is as much of an art as a science. When assessing a piece of writing for example, experienced teachers use a construct of what they think that grade should be based on their previous encounters with work of a similar standard. Wiliam argues that the teachers’ understanding of the construct is honed by considering and discussing borderline cases. He maintains that groups of markers should meet for discussion to form a community of interpreters. The pupils also need to be involved in this community. For this to be successful teachers must not only understand the quality themselves but also communicate this to their pupils (Sadler, 1989). Contrast this with what teachers were expected to do to grade pupils using level descriptors when assessing writing; a level 4 writer was expected to show evidence of

- The correct use of complex sentences to extend meaning.
- The well-chosen use of adverbial phrases and
- Consistent use of pronouns and tenses.

If all criteria are evident in the writing the teacher offers feedback intended to fill the gap between levels 4 and 5 for example, “to use a mixture of simple and complex sentences by making use of a variety of connectives.” When these levels were abolished in 2014 the move nationally from a single assessment system (levels) to a more flexible, school-determined approach whilst providing new opportunities also created uncertainty in schools as to what to replace them with.

Black (1995) had written that most of the investment in assessment whether in practical operations or in research has been devoted to certification and accountability to the neglect of the formative. This was because governments, taxpayers and parents want to know how the education system is performing and the results of assessment are also used as market forces to aid parental choice and promote competition between schools (Murphy, 1999). Central government had been less willing to invest in teacher training in formative assessment or the funding of qualitative research for this concept. This may have been because the process was found to be costly and time-consuming. People who control change are likened to “*gatekeepers*” (Wignall, 1998: p. 311). It is suggested that *gatekeepers* espousing a blind belief in the scientific validity and reliability of assessment data per se exist at all levels in the education service and may be blocking understanding of the value of formative assessment in schools.

Those who adhere to a systems rationalist view of assessment accept an ordered and predictable reality which can be objectively studied and systematically

improved (Fullan, 1991). Systems-rationalist scholars explore a world they view in terms of cause and effect, a world they contend is shaped by factors they can identify, manipulate, and control. Systems-rationalists presume that a desired state can be objectively identified and described, and that some state of (near) perfection can be reached through logic and rationality. In their view researchers should and do remain objective and unbiased, they stand apart from the reality they investigate. They also claim to investigate that reality, to reconstruct it and by so doing identify causal links and develop universally applicable laws. As Greenfield explains of systems-rationalism according to this perspective

Facts stand separate and independent from theories about facts... it is possible to explain facts by theories and thereby gain control of them (1991b, 94).

Thus systems-rationalists tend to work with clearly defined problems and to offer specific and prescriptive solutions to those problems. As *gatekeepers*' successive governments have biased the system they control, by perpetuating a systems-rationalist view of assessment (Wignall, 1998: p. 311).

A different approach to assessment inquiry and one which the author believes has possibility in moving inspections forward to doing something with schools rather than to them is described by the phrase subjectivist-interpretivist (Carnahan, 1995). This is a perspective that acknowledges the world as constructed reality, in other words a product of human action and interaction and of the meanings that social actors attach to their experiences (Van Manen, 1992). For Subjectivist-interpretivists

The social world (is) not... a world of cause and effects but a world of meanings that must constantly be negotiated and renegotiated (Donmoyer, 1995: p. 5). From this perspective then reality is value-laden rather than factual (Greenfield, 1993b: 181). Greenfield points out, although facts and values are conceptually distinct those who research assessment encounter.

A world in which facts and values are inevitably and intimately intertwined (Greenfield, 1993b: 181).

According to this line of reasoning the selection process through which humans choose to focus on particular facts and discount others, the interpretations that people place on their self-selected facts and the meaning they construct around these facts preclude the possibility of so-called scientific objectivity in assessment research. These ideas are more in line with attempts to develop a *constructivist* approach to assessment (Wood, 1986: p. 13).

Subjectivist-interpretivist theorists contend that real-life situations are not clearly defined they are part of human experience that is characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, paradox, and dilemma. They maintain that individuals may experience specific events quite differently at any one time and the same individuals could attribute different meanings from one time to another. From this perspective school organizations are human inventions, they are simply manifestations of mind and will (Greenfield, 1993a: p. 92). It is true that schools rarely offer real life situations they expose pupils to problems with already defined solutions for which the teacher as the gatekeeper (Wignall, 1998: p. 311), in his/her

classroom holds the key. It is this idiosyncratic aspect of schooling which makes it even more important for the researcher to study the context within which assessment and learning takes place.

Thus, in choosing to explore the social world of the school subjectivist-interpretivist theorists adopt methods and approaches intended to encompass both the complexities of the human condition and the values that underlie human actions, whilst trying to capture the multiple meanings that individuals attach to their experiences. From this perspective then assessment research will seldom lead directly to exemplary solutions of human problems, subjectivist-interpretivist research and theory can, however, illuminate what individuals do and why they do it (Greenfield, 1993c).

There is a place for both set of values as they serve different purposes but anyone seeking to understand formative as opposed to summative assessment need to promote a social constructivist view of the learner rather than a developmental behaviourist one (Piaget, 1972). Vygotsky (1987) and Bruner (1986) are key figures in this field. They both regarded shared acts of language as the key for unlocking other's minds to the child.

After years of being required to respond to the expectations of a national curriculum, a testing culture as well as examination criteria it would be naive to expect teachers to change their practice radically when so much is at stake for their schools but by 2003 after the publication of the Black and William review of formative assessment research (Black & Wiliam, 1998), this suddenly was what the government of the day expected to happen even though the reported research was based on experimental settings and not on real classrooms. The finding which caught government ministers' attention was that involving lower achieving pupils in formative assessment led to improved grades.

Influenced by the above finding it was becoming apparent that OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) was seeking to redress the balance between the technical and social aspects of assessment with the publication of "Good Assessment in Secondary Schools" (Tomlinson, 2001: p. 7) and a countrywide initiative was in place to promote the value of formative assessment for both pupils' learning and teacher planning. What I was observing in inspections, however, was very varied indicating a need for more teacher training in this field. I wrote, at the time, to David Bell Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools expressing my concerns over variations in uptake as seen when inspecting different schools.

In his reply he agreed that my findings were instructive and added

A great deal depends, as you say, on the way senior managers accept and pursue ideas and encourage staff to work through the implications for their practice, not just individually but in departments and teams (Bell, 2003).

As I considered how as an inspector/researcher I could be effective by reducing tensions and bridging the gap which often appears when giving feedback on practice to teachers I thought it was time to share my experiences with others whose research focus might expand this field of study. My main objective is to

offer a glimpse of one inspector's perspective and how research has informed her practice. My sub objectives are 1) to share my concerns about the imbalance between critical and social assessment forced on schools and inspectors by those with power over them 2) to encourage others to research this field of study with the intention of improving rather than abandoning inspections.

I began by thinking of the pupils' figured world from my own perspective, of how teachers had taught me as well as pertinent experiences which have influenced my socio-cultural approach to pedagogy and pupils' learning.

2. My Figured World

The "figured world" of the pupil (in the classroom) is quite different from that of her/his teacher because of the wide gap in knowledge and understanding brought about because of experience of the subjects being studied. The pupil's real-world experiences affect learning but are rarely recognised in the school context. In the "figured world" of the teacher there is a significant choice to be made between holding *power over* (Kreisberg, 1992: p. 175) the pupil by exercising tight control over action and speech and sharing power more equally by involving pupils more fully in the decision-making process. The teacher is the *gatekeeper* (Wignall, 1998: p. 311) in determining how much information is shared with pupils and how many opportunities are allowed for setting goals, understanding what constitutes quality in their work and deciding what the success criteria might look like ahead of undertaking the task. From my research I recognise that innovative formative assessment is a key for unlocking the gate so that teachers can more equally share power in the classroom, but for this to happen teachers need to change role for example from delivery person to coach or scaffolder to allow pupils to move from in attendance to absorbent recipient or metacognitive reflector (Burke, 2011).

As I observe current practice, I see similarities to what I experienced as a pupil. In 1949 my mother put pressure on the nun who taught me to enter me for grammar school entrance tests. Subsequently I was taught to the tests which I would need to pass to gain admittance. I recall practising nightly using old copies of tests as well as being primed in good examination technique by my teacher. I passed and my parents were delighted because they saw this form of education as opening wider opportunities for future employment. As no Catholic Grammar Schools were within reasonable traveling distance permission was given by the church for me to study at the mixed non-Catholic grammar school in the village. Within weeks of entering the very foundations of my world were shattered firstly because for the first time I was expected to think for myself and express opinions, but the more long-term effect was that I started to question the validity of the selection process I had been judged by and much later the restrictive religious beliefs I had been born into.

During the first term my maths master whilst looking at my workbook remarked "*oh you were the one who nearly did not pass your maths paper because your number fours resembled sevens. If I had not noted a pattern in the papers*

submitted from your school, I would have failed you.”

This was my first experience that assessment has a social dimension rather than being a scientific process.

The power my primary teacher had held over me also had a negative effect on my confidence in my own ability to express opinions and take risks particularly in Physical Education. Her voice in my head reminding me “*Girls need to be careful not to hurt themselves!*” Looking back through my termly report cards it took three years at this school before I began to gain confidence and show my potential, but I never again formed figure fours as my primary teacher had taught me. I also never told my parents how my education might have been different because of something outside my control.

An example of how exam requirements can limit teacher practice and pupils’ motivation to learn is considered next. One of the subjects I enjoyed learning about was history despite how it was taught. The master started each lesson by filling six blackboards with facts before he spoke to the class; our task as pupils was to scribble these down in our jotters before he rubbed them off the board. The rest of the lesson he elaborated on what he had shared in writing but offered no opportunities for discussion. Discipline was tightly controlled with the board rubber thrown strategically to prevent in-attention. There is nothing wrong with direct teaching, but it should not be used exclusively. Of all the pupils in my year only four of us made it to study the subject for A level. Here our experiences were different. The same teacher shared first hand documents, encouraged discussion and on one occasion admitted that for GCE (General Certificate in Education) he had to deliver facts and figures to cover the curriculum and to fulfil the criteria expected by the exam board but for A level he could really share his love of the subject with interested students who really wanted to learn.

I was three years into my grammar school education when I did something out of character for me, I stopped behind to ask this teacher a question after the lesson was over. He had been explaining how Jews and Roman Catholics were not allowed to be members of parliament and from what else he had told us this left me puzzled. I waited, frightened, until the master acknowledged my presence.

Please sir you told us that Jews and Roman Catholics could not be Members of Parliament but if that were the case how could Disraeli become Prime Minister?

For the first time I saw this master laugh before he said.

Oh, my dear he gave up being a Jew.

Startled I replied, *Is that possible?*

Of course, he said, we all have free will.

Researchers talk about the light bulb moment when learners understand a concept (Piaget, 1972) and how dialogue helps unlock other minds for the learner (Bruner, 1986). That was such a moment for me and one which transformed my subsequent approach to life. Looking back as a researcher myself, I regret that that teacher was so constrained by the examination syllabus he was preparing us for that he gave us the impression that he regarded us as empty

vessels to be filled with knowledge (Piaget, 1972) not fellow travellers learning from the decisions made by our forebears.

I recognise that my experiences as a pupil influenced my practice as a teacher, researcher, and inspector. In primary school I was controlled by the cane, in grammar school I was freed from this constraint and gradually gained in confidence. I determined as a teacher never to hit a child, and I never did. Going into a teacher training college rather than a university department I learned more about child development than theories of learning. Moving among students from different “figured backgrounds” to my own I recognised that school organisations affect outcomes. The head of the mixed grammar school I attended was a scientist and the focus there was more on science and maths than the arts. This was in sharp contrast to a fellow student’s experience. Her girls’ grammar school head was a Quaker and her beliefs in equal opportunities meant that all subjects were valued with alumni for example going onto to be well known actors, engineers etc. whereas the choice in my school was more limited, either university, teacher training or a local job. The headteacher’s career advice to my parents “don’t encourage art she’ll never make a living from it.” Fortunately, my mother did not heed the warning and for 20 years I taught secondary art then inspected it alongside other subjects for a further 11 years.

As written earlier, in this article, in teacher training college I learned a lot about the history of education and child development but less about theory. An early experience, whilst on school practice, shaped my subsequent approach to teaching and learning and I later understood it as changing my role to accommodate what Vygotsky identified as the student’s “zone of proximal development” or ZPD (Vygotsky, 1987). On this occasion my lesson plan was not working as I faced a very disruptive group of 16-year-old boys in an art lesson. I knew the art teacher was listening in her stockroom and I had been told by college tutors to stick to my plan. I decided to break the rules. I sat down with the group and asked them what they wanted to learn. They told me they were interested in cars and motor bikes. I admitted that they knew more about them than I did but if they liked I might be able to help with perspective, scale, or ellipses, they turned from “resistance fighters to metacognitive reflectors before my eyes”. After the lesson I expected criticism from the teacher, but her words gave me hope, “I knew at that moment when you acted on instinct to turn the lesson around that you would become a good art teacher.”

I did not know about “roles by metaphor” when I started teaching but I soon recognised how different pupils were in their approach to learning. I coined my own phrase for this my “back door children.” If I could not engage with them by the “front door” with methods that usually sparked interest, I tried to get their attention by what I termed the side or back door. Usually this involved a conversation with said individual about what interested them and then pitching the next step just ahead of what I later recognised as his/her proximal zone of development. These pupils were the most difficult to teach but as their teacher when I really engaged with them, I felt satisfaction that I might have enriched

their lives if not now but at some point, in their future by opening their eyes to creativity in an often-mundane working existence. Whilst my teacher colleagues often remarked “you have it easy teaching art, they all want to do it.” I knew they did not all want to draw or paint and “learned helplessness” was very evident even then (Dweck, 1986) as they sheltered behind their fears and found the solution in “*If I don't try, I can't fail*”.

As a teacher in my third year of practice, I had my first taste of inspection. It was something done to me and colleagues with little opportunity for dialogue (Bruner, 1986). One part-time English colleague recalls how she was criticized for reading King Solomon's Mines with her all-girl class and how she should have chosen something more gender specific. In fact, the English department were so short of class texts that this was all that was left when she went to choose her readers. She also admitted that the girls really enjoyed the book as being so removed from their lives on an inner-city council estate but there was no opportunity to explain either of these scenarios to the inspector.

By sharing examples from my “figured world,” I hope the reader understands how complex the teaching learning contract is with so many figured worlds involved coming together in the classroom. My teacher training college helped me to understand child development, but it was when I studied with the Open University, I recognised the importance of theory for pedagogy. Eleven years in the inspection service widened my experience but also made me aware how different school organisations can be as they serve different communities. Once I started thinking of the concept “figured worlds” I also started to regard my colleagues in inspection and the teachers I inspected in a different light, and this is where William's “roles by metaphor” entered my thinking. The research which follows I believe shows that a one size inspection based largely on data with inspectors' trained in this mode does not fit all needs.

3. Roles by Metaphor

Metaphors are useful tools for encapsulating complex ideas. The significance of the role is that it stands for an important determinant that can be changed, indeed change in role may be central to an innovation. When pupils learn to take responsibility for their own self-assessment for example, and begin to direct their efforts towards learning goals, they strive to increase their competency, to understand and master something new rather than performance goals (Dweck, 1989, 88-89) where they strive to either document or gain favourable judgements of their competency (externally driven) they also begin to move from absorbent recipient to constructive recipient. Innovative formative assessment, however, can only be fruitful if it encourages the teacher to change role for example from delivery person to coach or scaffolder. By explanation, the roles Black and William proposed are.

Teacher roles: - Prison warder, delivery person, scaffolder, coach, group animator, orchestral conductor

Individual Pupil roles: - in attendance, absorbent recipient, beauty contestant

Pupil groups: - terrorists, resistance fighters, beauty contestants, relay team, project team

Subjects: - tablets of stone, skills contexts, disciplines of knowledge, tools for capability

Thinking back to the incident in the art lesson reported, earlier in the article, that group of boys changed from “resistance fighters” to a project team when I realised that I needed to change role and stop delivering a previously prepared lesson and involve those boys more in the learning process.

Roles by metaphor might also I thought be a useful tool during inspections when providing feedback to teachers following lesson observation because it has the potential to be non-threatening.

I began by piloting this model as part of my normal inspection practice. I learned more about each teacher’s figured worlds as a result than I could have known from statistical sources or classroom observation. In one school I had noted missed opportunities for group work which might have allowed for greater involvement by pupils in the decision-making process allowing opportunities for teachers to stand back and observe students’ viewpoints. Dropping my “judge” role and encouraging dialogue allowed the teacher to move from “*absorbent recipient*” to deliverer of useful information as she explained that in that area of London postcode gangs controlled the streets and would also use group work in lessons to recruit, bully and coerce other students. Here her change in role allowed me a glimpse into the figured worlds of these teachers and students which I would not have had otherwise.

As an inspector, when I moved from my role as judge to scaffolder, I gave the teachers space to reflect on practice in a non-threatening environment as well as offer me feedback on reasons for that practice. One example of how effective this change proved must suffice. I had asked, why this teacher’s pedagogy was so different in his practical design and technology lessons to that seen in theory lessons and why the roles he adopted made such a difference to his students’ engagement in and motivation to learn in the two aspects of the subject? They were engaged and productive in the practical work but merely going through the motions in theory lessons. His reply was illuminating; - *I am more confident in teaching practical than I am in imparting theory. I had not realised what an effect my own attitudes were having on the students’ minds.*

Dialogue is important (Alexander, 2004: pp. 14-15) and this reciprocal feedback was much more effective in promoting meaningful change in pedagogy following inspector visits to lessons. Whether that change is sustainable however, will depend not only on the role of the teacher but also how they reconstruct the habits acquired by their pupils (Perrenoud, 1991). The same applies to inspectors and the teachers they offer advice to. From my own experience when revisiting a school sometimes little had changed whilst others showed changes in practice even before the inspection was over.

After piloting roles by metaphor in inspections I recognised that they had the possibility of helping to relieve tensions between teachers and inspectors. As a

change agent (Fullan, 1991) I also hoped they might help to redress the balance between the technical and social side of assessment in the minds of the inspectors with whom I worked.

Following changes at government level at this time schools were becoming more involved in the inspection process even agreeing a special focus by inspectors for example on one occasion we looked at the under achievement of boys. I took my opportunity to introduce the concept of roles by metaphor to one lead inspector and his team when the special focus for the sixth form was: -

- How much independence do teachers give learners?
- Should independence be planned for as a phased process throughout schooling?

I was given permission and a team of fifteen specialist inspectors collected information using roles by metaphor alongside their normal form filling when inspecting a sixth form.

It is not surprising that inspectors were unsure of using this model at first with one asking, “*what has this got to do with assessment?*”? Another surprised me by commenting that my observation forms were all about pupils’ learning where Her’s were about teaching. As a result of such exchanges, I started to gain more understanding of how each of our figured worlds as inspectors might be adding to tensions rather than relieving them. Soon however, roles by metaphor started to enter the team’s vocabulary with terms like *plate spinners* being coined to describe themselves as coping with so many tasks at once. One colleague reported that the senior common room was buzzing with good humour as the head of sixth form shared the inspectors’ observations and commented that the team had identified strong areas where teacher roles maximise opportunities for student independent learning as well as areas where they had work to do. When the headteacher saw the analysis, he started to speculate about the previous key stages. He recognised that insufficient consideration may have been given in the school to gradually implementing strategies to develop independence from teachers as pupils progressed through the school.

A lot has happened since I stopped inspecting in 2004 with the abolition of National Curriculum levels in 2014 and schools expected to be more flexible on how teachers plan and assess learning. But once prescriptive practices are removed there is often a need for training before schools, departments and teachers adapt to the new system. Clair Hodgson’s (2017) article Assessment: Developing your own approach offers good advice to those administering or working in schools as to what might need to be in place before assessment as a social process is fully effective throughout a school. Her investigation centred on Key Stage 3.

4. Conclusion

Having worked this model alongside the normal inspection processes I recognise that roles by metaphor have the potential to help breakdown barriers between the figured worlds of those who inspect as well as those inspected by making

feedback as something “done with the teachers rather than done to them”. My colleagues and I found the metaphors were regarded with humour which softened the feedback process and made teachers more willing to be open to dialogue about their practice. At the same time, the inspector often learned contributing factors which helped clarify the context in which observations had taken place. I believe the change of emphasis regarding assessment in this sixth form influenced the final report which was shared in the public domain. The assessment sections start *Students are active in assessing their own learning, as more traditional approaches to assessment are gradually being replaced. Under the visionary leadership of the head of sixth form, assessment is now more linked to active teaching and learning styles.*

Whilst one sentence stands out in the teaching and learning section as a very hopeful sign that quality in learning is valued. *An almost observable feature of this effective learning is that students are feeling for the knowledge and skills they acquire; through this knowledge and skills become a part of them. Teaching that evokes such a response is rare daily yet was seen several times during inspection. It features active learning, good questioning and well-planned structured lessons from which students learn well.*

Unfortunately, inspections in England have now changed to a light touch investigation by one or two inspectors with even more emphasis on the technical side of assessment as recorded in statistical data and opportunities such as that described above are no longer possible. This is another example of a decision made by government ministers controlled by economic considerations or ideological beliefs with little consideration as to what might consequently be lost. The death of a headteacher following a critical report on the school she managed is a timely reminder of what is at stake.

There is only room here to share some of the observations made by these sixth form inspectors(Appendices A and B), but I hope the reader will understand how they could form the basis for a meaningful discussion between those involved and as such might lead to changes in or reinforcement of practice.

One inspector’s response in Appendix B drew my attention “good old-fashioned question and answer”. After later attending a seminar by Professor Black (2006) on the use of questions in classrooms entitled “The Power, the Prospect, and the Problems” with hindsight I would have liked to have discussed with the inspector concerned the extent of his/her understanding of the concept. Questions are very important in improving learning but can also prove a limiting factor.

Food For Thought

“Three-hundred kilometres an hour’ says Astolfi (1991),

That is the speed of the French TGV,

But it is also the number of exchanges.

That flow between teacher and pupils

During a lesson in secondary education

Half of these exchanges emanate from the teacher.” (Perrenoud, 1998: p. 91)

As inspectors and teachers, we can all learn from research.

5. Cognitive Enquiry

Through neuroscientific research, it is now understood that talk is necessary not just for learning but also for the building of the brain as a physical organ. Although it has long been known that the first three years of life are critical to subsequent development, it is now recognised that the periods between 3 - 4 and 10 - 11 are ones in which the brain builds cells and makes new connections. They develop the capacity for learning, memory, emotional response, and language, all on a scale, which decreases markedly thereafter (Kotulak, 1996).

6. Sociological Enquiry

Researchers point out that classrooms may be places where teachers do the talking rather than the children and where supposedly open questions are really closed questions and where, instead of thinking through a problem, children devote their energies to spot the “correct” answer (Barnes et al., 1969; Jackson, 1967).

International research (Alexander, 2004) highlights how different are the status, character, context, and uses of talk in many English classrooms by comparison with their European neighbours where, for example:

- The purpose of classroom talk is seen as mainly cognitive, whereas in England it tends to be seen as primarily social and affective; about developing children’s confidence rather than developing thinking.

Research such as those quoted above informed my own looking as a teacher and an inspector.

Why concentrate on the sixth form to evaluate “roles by metaphor”? This was just a trial to judge the reactions of those involved, and time constraints and the fact that I was asking more of inspectors in their already busy agendas influenced this decision. It is admitted that to really answer the questions raised about progression in independent learning a much more thorough investigation would need to be undertaken. This one did open a dialogue between inspectors and teachers focused on their own subject disciplines, it also raised questions in the headteacher’s mind about the previous key stage. The head of sixth form also had a clearer idea where pedagogy might need further training and where in the school the expertise might exist to deliver it effectively.

Regarding the testing culture in the United Kingdom the results of a new survey by campaign group **MORE Than a Score** (MTAs) show that few taking part believe in the value of SATs (standard assessment tests) (2023). Just 17 percent of parents believed good SATs results are the best indicator of whether the primary child has received a good education. Only 3% of heads and senior teachers shared this view. Leaders selected love of learning (63%), independent thinking (56%), and a good grasp of a range of subjects as the best indicators of high education standards. It is time for a better balance between the technical and social aspects of assessment in England.

Teachers also are raising their voices against OFSTED. On 23rd March 2023, a

group of teachers joined the NEU deputy general secretary to deliver a petition to the Department for Education calling for OFSTED to be replaced by a “new accountability system that is supportive, effective and fair” (Sweeney, 2023: p. 21). Rather than abandon OFSTED investigations such as those described in this article have the potential to bring about a better balance in the English accountability system.

After a lifetime in education, I retain an all-consuming interest in how teachers use their subject knowledge to facilitate their pupils’ learning. I hope through my writing to raise awareness of issues and ways forward that will ensure that teachers’ practice will reflect the needs of a child’s present and his/her future rather than being constrained by an adults’ past and that those judging schools will move from *delivery person* to that of *critical friend*. It may be interesting at this point to reflect on the roles these sixth form teachers used to describe inspectors they had met during their careers; *silent spectre, inquisitor, judge, absorbent recipient, detective, sleeping beauty, reporter, critical friend*.

We are living in a fast-changing society where recent technologies expand the boundaries of communication and where epidemics like Covid can traverse continents, with mental health issues, knife crime, gang culture etc. also impacting on our pupils’ lives. It is time that assessment as a social process is given equal prominence in schools and in inspections and teachers’ and pupils’ voices are listened to in a none threatening environment before the significant minority of disenchanting teachers and young people swells and society pays the price for schools not understanding the figured real world both teachers and young people inhabit outside the classroom.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix A

Breakdown of teacher role change by subject

RE Delivery man/woman, change to orchestral conductor.

Geography Delivery man/woman, change to scaffolder, then orchestral conductor

Art and Design Delivery man/woman, change to coach.

Psychology Scaffolder, change to group animator, and orchestral conductor.

ICT Delivery man/woman. change to coach.

Engineering Prison warder, change to delivery man/woman.

Leisure/ Tourism Group animator, change to scaffolder.

English delivery man/woman, change to group animator.

Maths Delivery man/woman, change to coach.

Theatre studies group animator

Physics Prison warder, change to delivery man/woman.

Sociology Delivery man/woman, change to coach.

Biology Group animator

Appendix B

Inspector's comments about pedagogy changes on lesson effectiveness regarding students' learning

RE Teacher uses knowledge to move learning forward by asking pertinent questions, students encouraged to do own research and form own opinions.

Geography Teacher is moving from a focus on content delivery to using a range of teaching approaches, particularly collaborative work for a presentation on Italy.

Art and design students gain from teacher's expertise as artist, then work independently except in emergencies when advice is sought.

Psychology Offering conceptual arguments then opportunities for reflection and debate, teacher acts as mediator between subject and students.

ICT Teacher is enhancing students' capacity to interact directly with technology.

Engineering Gap in knowledge not being filled by teacher's own craft experience (new to teaching) Students need a lot of scaffolding after absence.

Leisure and Tourism Solid good old-fashioned question and answer

Maths Start of a new topic teacher acting as mediator between subject and students.

English Teacher introduces focus then stands back and gets students to analyse, evaluate, interpret, and draw comparisons.

Theatre Studies Once grouping for scene is established students encouraged to think laterally, to produce suggestions for portraying comic elements through rhythm, timing, and setting.

Physics Teacher is acting as mediator between subject and students, all aware of target grades and standard aimed for.

Music Uses students' own knowledge, gets them to compare their use of a new Keyboard with functions of other digital equipment.

Sociology Teacher helps students identify goals prior to exam, moves to involve them in understanding how they could improve by two grades.

Biology Teacher reviews previous work prior to supervising students preparing for a field work residential, investigative approach.