Chapter 12

The Experience of Ofsted: fear, judgement and symbolic violence

Catherine Gallagher and Rob Smith

Abstract

After framing the issues with an overview of comparative international models of accountability in teacher education (in the US and Australia (e.g. Cochran-Smith et al 2016, Darling-Hammond and Hyler 2013 and Marshall et al 2012), this chapter assesses Ofsted in its role as a regulator of quality in educational standards. The absence of an overall national regulator in other countries has a consequence of instituting 'fear' as a technology of compliance in the English context. The chapter focuses specifically on one particular inspection of initial teacher education (ITE) courses run by a HE/FE partnership in the West Midlands of England but the conclusions it draws are applicable more widely to the role of Ofsted as a market regulator as it currently operates in the HE and FE sectors (and the education sector as a whole) in England. The inspection took place in March 2013 and this chapter draws on the experiences of HE and FE teacher educators from the partnership to provide a basis for discussion. It will illustrate how the English model of accountability has moved way beyond both US and Australian models. Drawing on the work of Paul Virilio and Francesc Torralba the chapter explores the role fear plays in inspection, positioning it as a key ingredient in the institutional habitus that is introduced and affirmed by Ofsted.

Introduction

England shares many of the neoliberal features of education policy that can be seen in, for example Australia and the US. To that extent, there are similar debates about teacher 'performance' and accountability (see Marshall et al 2012, Darling-Hammond and Hyler 2013, Cochran-Smith et al 2012) and about university involvement in teacher education (Smith et al 2013). In England, the vexed issues of teacher accountability and the role of HEIs in teacher education crystallise in the function and workings of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Geographical considerations may mean that while the US and Australia both have a patchwork of different overseeing bodies, in England, Ofsted is *the* sole national mechanism for enforcing market accountability in relation to 'teacher performance' and accountability in schools and colleges. In addition to this, recent educational policy in England (DfE 2016) signals how the place of university-based teacher education has become contested which makes Ofsted's role in overseeing teacher education programmes in universities all the more significant.

Neoliberal dependence on so-called performance data positions Ofsted as an enforcer of the *doxa* of technical rationality that marketised forms demand. The underpinning emphasis in regulation relies on 'thin equity' (Cochran et al 2016: 4) that positions teachers as a key variable in learners' educational outcomes at the expense of a perspective that takes broader social factors into account. But issues of social justice to one side, this chapter will focus on Ofsted's enforcement role and, using Bourdieu, will theorise how Ofsted delegates 'pedagogic authority' through inspection and legitimates and models 'symbolic violence' through authoritative judgement.

In England, all further education colleges produce performance data on an annual basis in order to continue to draw down public funding. This data forms part of the accountability

mechanisms that have historically attached to marketised public sector organisations. Data is amassed centrally by government to give an overall picture of 'productivity' and 'standards' and to inform target-setting. Locally, market position for individual colleges depends more critically on the judgement of an external market regulator. Ofsted carries out inspections across England in order to ensure the 'robustness' of performance data and to maintain standards in schools, colleges, nurseries and other children's services. These inspection visits last several days. Ofsted presents itself as having a mission to 'help providers that are not yet of good standard to improve, monitor their progress and share with them the best practice we find' (Ofsted 2014A), to raise standards and 'drive improvement… for all learners' (Ofsted 2014B). Ofsted's role also extends to inspecting teacher education courses for further education teachers. Inspections contribute to market data as they culminate in the publication of an overall grade for the performance of the institution in question. In this way, Ofsted not only acts as an external and supposedly objective judge of the quality of provision, it also provides 'market information' supposedly to influence consumer choice.

This chapter draws on the experiences of university and college teacher educators from a partnership made up of one university and eight colleges in the West Midlands of England. These experiences were collated to form a body of data gathered during an inspection of initial teacher education (ITE) courses for college teachers in March 2013.

The National Context

In the neoliberal *weltbild*, the central role of education in human capital production (Becker 1993) has increased government focus on the way in which teachers are educated. Between 2010 and 2014, university-based models of teacher education were undermined by Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education (see Mansell 2013). Gove was outspoken in his views about HE-led teacher education, calling his opposition The Blob (see for example Robinson

2014) and he introduced an inspection regime of teacher education programmes in which Ofsted's judgement was linked to future funding. This assault on 'ideological' teacher education culminated in the introduction of a more 'robust' framework by Ofsted (running from Sept 2012 – June 2014) which scrapped the 'satisfactory' judgement and replaced it with 'requires improvement'.

In relation to ITE courses, to complicate the situation further, the publication of the Lingfield Report (BIS 2012) removed the requirement for college teachers to be qualified *as teachers*. Whether college staff needed to be qualified as teachers was left to principals to decide.

Theory

Bourdieu and Passeron see symbolic violence as an integral aspect of power relations in educational settings:

> *Every power to exert symbolic violence, i.e. every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate… adds its own specifically symbolic force to those power relations.* (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2013: 4)

In what some may view as an overly deterministic view, Bourdieu and Passeron see education as reproducing the power relations of a given society and position pedagogic actions and through those the role of teachers, centrally in the reproduction of the existing social order. Their thinking equates pedagogic action with 'symbolic violence' inasmuch as it is the imposition of a 'cultural arbitrary' (ibid. 5) in the interests of a particular group or class. Bourdieu and Passeron see legitimacy or pedagogic authority as a necessary aspect of this process and view the process as 'invisible' to both teachers and learners.

Leaving a discussion of how critical pedagogy sits theoretically outside this operation of symbolic violence to Chapter 3, this chapter will focus on the key role of teacher education in

the reproduction of the social practice of further education. In the discussion that follows, we will develop a commentary about one Ofsted inspection to provide a sense of how a centralised market regulator can act as a mediator of government policy. In doing this, we will present inspections as events / sites of struggle over pedagogic authority.

The Partnership Inspection

Despite deregulation, the partnership courses involved in the inspection that is the focus of this chapter were running in several different colleges and remained an important part of the University's ITE provision. The focus was on the university as having a central role in designing and administering the courses. The inspection was announced by a phonecall asking staff to supply all the performance data of the previous three years with a commentary on trends. The lead inspector also asked for a list of all students' names, their subject specialisms and placement addresses so that observations could be carried out. On the following Monday, six inspectors travelled to different colleges in the partnership while the Lead Inspector came to meet the course leaders at the University. Over the next three days, the Lead Inspector held report back sessions each evening at 5pm at the University to provide insights into inspection findings so far. On the final Thursday morning, there was an 'information-giving' session at which the Lead Inspector offered headline findings.

The next section will draw on data (in the form of written reflections and notes) as gathered by the teacher educators during and in the immediate aftermath of the partnership inspection.

Measuring learning

The partnership's position on grading course in this case was unusual as it did not adhere to Ofsted's grading framework of using the assessment labels 'outstanding', 'good', 'requires improvement' and 'inadequate' to student teachers or their lessons. This appeared to be an

obstacle for the inspection team as its frame for analysis and commentary on students' progress was not there to draw upon. In the absence of a series of grades to measure progress, the courses being inspected were structured around a personalised critical dialogue between personal tutor, mentor and student that mapped across students' journal entries, observations, academic coursework and action planning. But seemingly the inspectors found the depth, nuance and detail evidenced by this dialogue to be less effective at providing the teacher educators or the students with an insight into their progress than 'clearer' grades.

Measuring learning became a theme during the inspection. According to participants' notes, the final grading session provided a series of comments on this theme.

> There is a lack of evidence of trainees understanding what level they are at

And:

> There's a nagging concern about trainees being aware about how they are performing as benchmarked against best practice in the sector

Underpinning these statements is a view of learning that involves steady and measurable progress from one 'level' to the next, like stairs on a staircase with each stair being the same height. Ofsted's paperwork does not include any definition of learning as a calibrated process and this was not the Partnership's view of how learning is structured but clearly Ofsted's role as centralised regulator requires such a definition. Apart from the reliance on the discredited notion of 'best practice' (see Coffield and Edward 2009), here the *use* of grading is conflated with providing students with a national overview of where they stand in relation to the practice of other (outstanding, good, requires improvement, inadequate) teachers. The implicit message is of a need to adopt a normative, officially sanctioned approach. This connects to the focus on 'a lack of evidence' revealing how the enforcement of the inspection operates at two levels: first, it assesses evidence but secondly, it polices what counts as

‘evidence’ in this way asserting a culturally arbitrary typology. This assesses the Partnership as needing to focus not just on delivering high quality teacher education, but on creating evidence of this in a form deemed acceptable.

The same issue re-surfaced in another feedback session:

> It is not clear that the University tracks students' progress throughout the year

This notion of ‘tracking progress’ suggests a similarly linear view of learning. The inspectors required numerical data as evidence of tracking. The store of qualitative evidence of students’ growing awareness and development that was a cornerstone of the course was invalidated because no numerical summary of progress was available.

One of the college teacher educators described a discussion with an inspector in the following way:

> The inspector stayed for the whole lesson which was two hours and at the end... she whispered to me, “Can we have a chat”?... The next hour and a half was an extraordinary occasion because the inspector proceeded to try every way she could to extract from me any negative comments about the non-grading of observations (and) communications with the university partnership...
>
> On the Wednesday she held a lunchtime meeting with the team including our line managers. She pursued the same agenda… It must have been frustrating for her because... I have no problem with giving verbal developmental feedback and I do have my doubts that giving any person a “number” makes their teaching any better or worse from year to year.

Grading then is an important part of the approach and in our analysis this links to i) the (admittedly crude) shorthand idea that grading creates a sense of comparable standards across

institutions and ii) it provides a speedy comparative shorthand. The grading of students epitomises the symbolic violence wrapped up in assessment. Symbolic violence in grading operates through the imposition of an 'objective' grade, a 'labelling' (Becker 1973) that has as its focus not the learning and development of the student, but instead, a connection to an external matrix of value for the purposes of providing market data.

But the inspection in this case moved beyond asserting a metrics-based norm; it also attempted to model assessment as a social practice and through that to provide a template for social relations between teacher educators and students – as the next section will outline.

Modelling symbolic violence and pedagogic authority

The partnership approach to observation and providing feedback also surfaced during the inspection visits. One HE colleague recounted:

> This was a positive experience and we had a 3 way discussion... (student, inspector, tutor). I gave the usual reflective feedback and when I finished (the inspector) agreed with the points... He then offered feedback to the student and started with 'I think you will be a fantastic teacher'..... Then he asked the student about how the feedback was given – in which he felt my reflective questioning was 'long winded' and that the student might prefer me to 'get to the point' ... (I concluded that feedback is very much a non-negotiated method with Ofsted as I imagine they have a grade and thus a discussion is not needed?)
>
> Ofsted approach - short and to the point: 'You're fantastic and here are some points that could be developed... My approach: 'Let's talk about your teaching and learning and where do we want it to go? What else would you need to do to become the teacher you want to be and what do your learners need?' I think the difference is that we want

> teachers to have ownership over who they are as teachers. Ofsted's approach is that 'we tell you what sort of teacher you are' and it is non-negotiable and static.

The passage is important because the focus is on *how* the assessment is communicated. The difference in approach here is rooted in a different view of how learning works and how knowledge and power interact. The Ofsted approach can be characterised in Bourdieusian terms of pedagogic authority: the tutor is required to undertake the role of authoritative judge. The observation process is an important opportunity to assert that authority. The assessor is the infallible judge, capable of absolute and objective judgement. This carries with it a set of assumptions about power and knowledge. There is no sense of co-construction of meaning and the knowledge travel is strictly one way (and presumably believed to be objective). This can be viewed as a normative intervention aimed at shaping the relations between students and teachers as well as its tone. The imposition of meaning provides an explicit example of symbolic violence as a cultural and pedagogic practice.

Authoritative Judgement

On the third day, the Lead HMI reported that the Partnership could not be 'outstanding' because the sample students that had been observed were 'not universally good or better'. This phrasing suggests that, as signifiers, the categories depend on their relation to each other rather than on any connection to a signified reality. It was pointed that the course had three months to run, time enough for the students observed to improve; according to participants, the reply was:

> The student observed this morning will never be a good teacher.

This definitive (and summative) statement prompted the question: do the inspectors take account of the different rates at which students learn? – which was answered in the

affirmative. What was worrying here was that the lead inspector appeared entirely ignorant that the force of his comments was nudging the teacher educators towards the kind of 'gaming' that has become prevalent in marketised educational settings. There was a lack of awareness that to achieve 'improvement' might involve the adoption of an admissions policy that discriminated against applicants from lower income / social class and People of Colour (PoC) backgrounds in favour of white middle class students. This would mean diluting a commitment to a widening participation agenda.

Ofsted's high stakes regulatory power: How did we get here?

The blinkered fixation on performance data is a key area of weakness. The following passage from Ofsted's Annual Report of 2013 illustrates the problem:

> Getting quality assurance and performance management right are core to improving the quality of teaching and learning. Where procedures were ineffective at improving teaching… managers typically failed to use data on learners' performance to identify areas of provision with weaker teaching. (Ofsted 2013)

The passage demonstrates a lack of understanding of the gap that has opened up in colleges (and schools) nationally between performance data and good (or outstanding) teaching and learning. Worryingly, there is also a failure to understand that the emphasis on data has led to a generation of teachers who have been effectively trained in manipulating it and that this activity is prioritised by managers at the expense of a focus on real teaching and learning.

Ofsted is not as it claims to be an 'independent and impartial' body (Ofsted 2014) but rather is there to model symbolic violence: to train teachers to adopt a legitimised disposition of assessment and authoritative judgement. This amounts to policing cultural compliance and the penalising any educational institution that fails to pay lip service. Ofsted's approach is

best encapsulated in the term ‘managerialist positivism’ (Smith and O’Leary 2013). This is an ideological position which underpins new public management (NPM), a data-driven approach that has taken hold in the public sector. Managerialist positivism actively disregards context, insisting instead that everything can be measured and compared in a straightforward way across different contexts.

Fear, technical rationality and habitus

It’s difficult to underestimate the dread that fills teachers when contemplating the arrival of Ofsted in their school, college or university. The short notice period of two days designed to make inspections more ‘robust’ means the fear of Ofsted inspections now blights whole academic years as colleges and schools are left hanging in anticipation of the call that announces an imminent inspection. Fear is an everyday aspect of the college teacher’s lifeworld. Fear is embedded in their practice, is a constitutive part of their professional identity and fear is at the core of the model of change that Ofsted embodies, how it operates to bring about change.

> We are afraid of what we cannot control, dominate, calculate, anticipate and plan: everything that slips through the net of rationality. Not for nothing, in cultural contexts in which the fragility of reason is an essential note, fear increases significantly. We mistrust its power to deliver us from evil. We have ceased to believe in traditional religion, but also in the potential of modern reason. (Torralba 2011: 59)

The quotation above sees fear as arising from the irrational features of our hypermodern conditions. This begins with the enforcement of one set of ‘rational’ procedures over another. In the current system, achievement data is taken as *the* measure of performance within the so-called market. This reduction of complex social and intellectual activity into numerical data (and often a single unifying ‘grade’) is a necessary feature of a marketised system that relies

on comparison, competition and the publication of market data to bring about improvement. While damaging in the sense that it works against the interests of learners and clearly erodes public trust, this self-interested manipulation of performance data for institutional ends also produces the conditions for the growth of fear.

Fear operates in different ways in the playing out of the procedures of technical rationality in colleges. First, teachers are required to be complicit in the production of performance data. The requirement is straightforward: poor performance data leads to course closure and potential redundancy. But fear also operates at a deeper level and Ofsted's role highlights this. The opening up a fissure between the simulations offered by crafted performance data and the real, lived experience of educational interactions and their complex social outcomes is disruptive of any sense that reason connects to the meaning of teachers' work.

The Bourdieusian concept of habitus is helpful here. The notion of habitus explains the norms, practices and ways of thinking that operate as norms in order to reproduce particular social conditions (Bourdieu 1994). The habituation that underpins the meaning of the term extends, importantly, to physicality: the repetition of bodily movements, repeated activities and, we would argue affective states and dispositions.

From this we can see that Ofsted's role is to affirm the simulations, the market truth as it were, that are key aspects of the legitimisation of the marketised further education landscape. The necessity of legitimising these simulations involves promoting assessment 'events' that will yield appropriate data to support an entire edifice sustained by symbolic violence. The core of the function of Ofsted is legitimisation: the modelling and insistence on a specific form of pedagogic authority.

Concluding thoughts

The first point to make about the above inspection is that the analysis has enabled us to move well beyond the crude assumption of there being any direct relation between the inspection and any 'improvement' in the ITE offered by the partnership. The 'the implementation of (a) public summative evaluation' (as noted by Cochran-Smith et al 2016: 3) was merely a part of the symbolic violence visited upon the ITE partnership that positioned it within the external marketscape. The summative judgment in this case was powerful in i) shaping future funding possibilities and ii) influencing public perceptions. Its power lay solely in the potential for damage. That assertion fundamentally undermines the policy assumptions underpinning the monolithic Ofsted regime: that inspections lead to improvement.

Ofsted's role is complicated by the rapidity with which inspections are carried out. The production of market data necessitates velocity (Virilio 2006, 2012) and risks a superficial model that reproduces expectations similar to *Pygmalion in the Classroom* effect (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968). The grades (with their veneer of objectivity) are an integral aspect of pedagogic authority but despite that, Ofsted's modelling suggests that the grades awarded to individual colleges are less important than the encounter with authority represented by the inspection. Viewed through that lens, inspection is a disciplinary event that attempts to coerce providers into adopting the centrally prescribed cultural practice of symbolic violence. Inspections are vital events in conditioning the habitus of teachers which means fear is an essential affective element in the legitimisation of neoliberal norms.

Positioning symbolic violence and fear at the heart of an analysis of Ofsted enables us to outline the principles of some meaningful alternatives. First and foremost this may require a re-examination of the purposes of further education (Biesta 2013) and a shift away from market orientated cultures. Then, if we want to improve standards of teaching and learning through the involvement of a national agency, that body needs to shift its focus away from surface data and engage fully with the contextual issues and narratives of each institution

inspected. In other words, such a body needs to be working with and alongside teachers, not managers. While Ofsted's focus continues to centre on such reductive and unreliable data and leadership and management in response focuses on promoting corporate cultures that ensure such data is favourable, learning and teaching will always take second place.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need to re-examine the place of fear in the current system. If the improvement of learning and teaching in colleges requires learning, then we need to ask ourselves:

Is fear the best way of bringing about changes for the better in our colleges?

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