

REFLECTIONS ON THE CHALLENGES OF HEADSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

I retired in April 2020 after 17 years as a Headteacher, serving four different schools across two local authorities. One thing that remained constant throughout this period was the privilege I felt being a school leader. I deliberately chose to work in challenging schools serving more deprived communities. I was driven by the belief that a high-quality education has the power to transform the life chances of young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In this paper I reflect on my personal experience of government policy during this period and the impact it had on school leaders. In doing so, we will revisit two underpinning themes that featured throughout my headship career. The first was that education became part of the election battleground with each party developing their own ideas and thinking about the direction of education that, in turn, became policy for the successfully elected party. Successive Secretaries of State had their own view of what state education should look like. I have not always been convinced that all policy was based on educational theory and sometimes wonder if it derived from the minister's own personal experience of education! Sir Kevan Collins describes this as the 'Complacency of Certainty' (2021) where ministers speak with authority on education without any substance or research to back it up. The impact this had on school leaders was to experience a see-saw effect as policies swung one way and then the other as governments and ministers changed. The second underpinning theme was the breakdown in trust between the government and the education profession. It is evident that this lack of trust in the system led to the growth of a command-and-control model whereby schools were compelled to follow government policy.

To explore these themes, I will focus on three key areas of government policy that were intended to improve standards and reduce education inequality. First the rise of academisation under Tony Blair's New Labour that accelerated with the Coalition government under David Cameron. Second the government policies designed to give parents far greater choice whilst also creating competition between schools. To this end, we will explore the two system changes that successive governments utilised to drive this culture of choice and competition starting with the high stakes accountability associated with examination results and then finally, reviewing my experience of the Ofsted process.

THE RISE OF ACADEMIES

This was a period of significant change for the profession that included the introduction of sponsored academies, the rising power of regional schools commissioners, the growth of multi-academy trusts and the decline of local authorities. Either by choice, design or fate, I managed to experience all of these changes first-hand.

When Tony Blair was elected in 1997 one of his key electoral pledges was, 'Education, education, education'. Quite rightly, he saw that a highly educated workforce was essential for Britain to become economically successful. After all, the greatest gift we can give any child is access to an excellent education, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds where it can really make a difference to their life chances. Lord Andrew Adonis was a key minister in the development of Blair's education policy and the introduction of academies was a significant strategy aimed at transforming the quality of education especially in deprived communities where standards had been far too low for generations. Successful business people were encouraged to sponsor academies and use their business acumen to drive up the quality of leadership, ambition and provision in schools. Academies were given greater freedom and autonomy to innovate. They were removed from local authority control, were no longer constrained by the national curriculum and were not required to employ staff under national pay and conditions. Although academies are funded using the same formulae as other schools in their LA, they receive more money as they also receive the top-slice usually retained by the LA for central services.

In the earliest days of the programme, schools benefited from complete rebuilds with state-of-the-art technology and fantastic facilities. This massive investment in school building was very welcome and certainly transformed the learning environment for scores of school communities. Initially, sponsored academisation was 'forced' on failing schools; many of whom were judged to require special measures. Under the Coalition government's 2010 Academies Bill, the academy programme accelerated as good and outstanding schools were encouraged to convert to academies and sponsor other schools that were RI or worse. *'The coalition began its term in office by introducing a range of supply-side measures designed to "set education free," introducing yet more new providers and new choices, wresting yet more schools away from local authorities by creating many more academies...'* (Ball, S p. 135). The scale of this expansion is illustrated by the fact that there were only 203 academies in 2010 but this had expanded to over 4,400 by 2015 (Ball, S p. 136).

This coincided with the growth of multi-academy trusts that were encouraged by the Cameron government to improve standards whilst also increasing financial efficiency. The thinking was that good or outstanding

academies could share their expertise to the benefit of underperforming schools whilst also reaping the benefits of the economies of scale. Initially, all academies were under the centralised control of the DfE but as the number of academies rose sharply, the government decided that regionalised control was necessary, and the Regional Schools Commissioners were created. They took responsibility for regulating and intervening in academies whilst also advocating the expansion of academies programme in their region. Much of this government policy was driven by three main factors; improving the quality of education so that more schools were judged good or better by Ofsted, creating greater competition between schools and, as a corollary of this, giving parents greater freedom to choose the best type of school for their child.

So, with successive governments maintaining this drive to open more and more academies, the question must be, are academies better than their local authority counterparts? The answer is very complex and depends a great deal on local context. No doubt, some, but not all, LA schools that had suffered years of failure and poor reputations benefitted from academisation. Many of these previously experienced a culture of low expectations, poor student behaviour and a lack of ambition. One thing that many sponsored academies brought, along with a brand-new building, was the creativity, rigour and energy necessary to shift the culture in underperforming schools. The huge investment that these academies received enabled school leaders to completely transform the culture of schools in the most deprived parts of the country and, thereby, address social and educational inequalities. Rather than using statistics based on examination results and Ofsted gradings to compare academies to LA schools, I want to reflect on my experiences of leading both types of schools and identify what I saw as the main strengths and limitations of each.

When leading a local authority school, the LA was fully committed to supporting the school's improvement but with limited impact in my experience. There was an advisor for virtually every subject on the curriculum but I am not sure that the process of termly meetings and infrequent school visits had much success. It lacked intensity, quality and accountability. Although the school was paying indirectly for the support, the advisors were of variable quality and they were not held accountable for their input; I had no choice about which advisors came into school and could not hold the LA accountable for the impact of their provision. A more effective model occurred in the LA where I was working when they gave the Headteachers the school improvement funding and empowered us to use the money how we felt fit. We created a three-year strategic plan based on our self-evaluation, we set ourselves ambitious improvement targets with different Heads leading each priority and we met weekly to ensure the plan became a reality. This created a great sense of collaboration and cohesiveness across the

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city. We shared resources and expertise to help all schools improve over time. We agreed that every secondary child in the city was our collective responsibility removing the inter-school competitiveness that had existed before. This cut across the government's policy of increased competition. With the autonomy we were afforded combined with the freedom and resources to innovate and collaborate we were able to make a massive impact on standards across our schools. The local authority included academies and LA schools but this did not inhibit the spirit of cooperation and collegiality. To that end, both types of schools were equally able to thrive and succeed.

The other complexity of the academy versus LA school debate is that not all academies are alike. For example, there are stand-alone academies, a whole myriad of sponsored academy chains and MATs sponsored by schools. No doubt sponsored academies can have a huge impact as already mentioned. However, they can also have a downside from a school leaders' perspective. Headship in a sponsored academy can feel very different from leading an LA school or stand-alone academy. Sponsors, obviously, have a clear idea about the direction in which they want their school to travel. For the Head it can be a challenge to align your own vision and values with that of the sponsor. There is also a loss of autonomy and self-determination as the sponsor will want to have an element of control over the strategic direction of the school. Combine this with the huge pressure created by the expectation that results will immediately improve, it can be an incredibly stressful environment for Headteachers. We will explore the impact of high stakes accountability later but sponsored academies are probably where the stakes were the highest. Sponsors, with their reputations on the line and business approach, would not suffer a decline in results. It is not surprising, therefore, that the tenure of many Heads in sponsored academies was short lived! All school leaders will tell you that cohorts vary from year to year, and it is not always possible to sustain year on year improvement if a weaker cohort comes along. However, this has not always been understood or tolerated by sponsors and, consequently, heads have rolled.

Contrast this with my experience of leading a converter academy. Here, I really enjoyed the fact I had autonomy and could shape the school's future as I thought best. I did not have the LA trying to guide my decision making nor a sponsor telling me what to do. We had choice about where we purchased our services and could look beyond the LA and even to the private sector. Furthermore, given that we were paying directly for services, we could hold the providers accountable for the quality of their provision. To me, this was one of the huge advantages of being the principal of a stand-alone academy – independence from the LA and the freedom to innovate. Providing the school was successful or improving, the

DfE left you to your own devices. However, I believe that there are limitations to what can be achieved as a stand-alone academy especially when under pressure to rapidly raise standards. As a school leader, you can feel quite isolated and limited in terms of the resources available to support school improvement. This became even more acute under the Coalition government's period of austerity when school funding, in real terms, was significantly reduced.

Moving my school into a multi-academy trust addressed some of these issues. Being part of a Trust greatly increased leadership capacity and, due to my choice of MAT, I did not feel any loss of autonomy. Instead, there was a fantastic sense of collaboration between the Heads in the Trust. Resources and expertise were shared across the schools as we built a strong sense of collegiality, trust and community. To illustrate this point, when another school in the MAT was placed into special measures, I volunteered to move across to support them. As a MAT, this was relatively easy to facilitate. Having previously led two schools out of Ofsted category, I had a crystal-clear plan of what was needed to transform the fortunes of the school. Fifteen months later we achieved good across the board – the first time the school had been judged good by Ofsted. This rapid improvement would not have happened if the school had not been part of a MAT. The ability to share resources, which included moving senior staff from one school to another, meant that the academy was given the capacity, expertise and resources necessary for transformational change to occur.

Having led both LA schools and academies I can see the benefits of both. I am not aware of many academies that fully utilised the extra freedoms and earned autonomy that was central to the government's academisation policy. Most continued to follow the national curriculum and although there were some innovative approaches to the curriculum at the start of the academies programme, these are very few and far between now. From my experience, most have adopted national pay and conditions and 1265 prevails. The one area that many benefited from was the greater choice when buying services. When deciding which type of school is better, the key for me is the ability of the Headteacher to work with his or her community to develop the vision and values that will shape the future direction of the school. Schools will succeed if the Head has the high expectations and educational ambition to create a strong culture of learning. To this end, strong leadership will always prevail. Furthermore, schools will thrive where they can benefit from working collaboratively and share best practice and resources with other like-minded schools. This can happen in a strong local authority and certainly is a huge benefit of being part of a MAT. If given the necessary autonomy and support, including opportunities to work collaboratively with other schools, I do not think it matters what type of school it is.

HIGH STAKES ACCOUNTABILITY – EXAMINATION RESULTS

With education being a major battle ground during elections, giving parents more choice became a key focus for successive governments. After all, parents make up a large proportion of the electorate. Parents were not only given more choice of the type of schools available such as academies, free schools, LA schools and specialist schools but also able to choose the best school. For the latter to happen, parents needed to have clear criteria on which to base their choice. Obviously, there could be many features that a parent may look for from their child's school but two that became increasingly important were the Ofsted grading and examination/test results. Furthermore, both were used by the DfE to determine where intervention, such as academisation, was necessary to address falling standards. Both were also central to the government's policy of increased competition between schools believing that this would drive up standards. As a result, a great deal of significance was placed on examination results with the introduction of floor targets. Attainment and progress became the main criteria for Ofsted judgements on a school's overall effectiveness. Consequently, high stakes accountability became a major feature of school leadership during my time as Headteacher. Although the metrics used to measure school performance has changed from 5+A*-C including English and maths to the current Progress 8, Attainment 8 and EBacc, the high stakes accountability remains.

The introduction of floor targets with the bar being raised year on year put some school leaders under a huge amount of pressure. Even where schools were above the floor targets, headteachers were expected to achieve continually improving results. League tables were published showing the pecking order in the local authority so that parents and each school knew who the best and worst performing schools were. As the Head of schools serving deprived communities, this comparison between schools felt incredibly unfair. Improving results was a huge challenge when students and their families did not always value schooling, let alone qualifications. In many respects, for us to enable students to achieve the government's gold standard was far more challenging than neighbouring schools with more middle-class families. However, I knew that making excuses risked lowering expectations and results would not improve. Hence, I needed to believe that our learners could also achieve excellent results providing we developed the right culture of learning. What was frustrating is that this was never fully appreciated by Ofsted and certainly was not understood by parents when choosing schools.

The net result of high stakes accountability was that schools had to ensure as many students as possible achieved five passes at C or above including English and maths. When, under the Blair government, examinations were deregulated to

give BTECs and NVQs equivalence to GCSEs which usually equated to double or quadruple passes, many school leaders saw this as an opportunity to secure higher pass rates. BTEC qualifications in subjects like ICT, art, science and PE were chosen in preference to the same GCSE qualification in order to boost results. There were examples of schools where the whole cohort took one of these BTECs, due to its four GCSE equivalence, even if the qualification had no real value to the students. This is not to say that BTECs and NVQs do not have their place but what I would question is that, 'Was the growth in popularity of these alternative qualifications due to them being relevant to each student's needs or because they would help the schools improve their overall league table standing?'

John West Burnham has written a great deal about moral leadership. He stated that, '*The view that education is primarily a moral process and should therefore be led by those who are ethically literate.*' (2011 p.1). Teachers and school leaders are driven by their moral purpose to make a difference to young peoples' lives. It is why so many of us entered teaching in the first place. This means that ethically, our decisions should be based on the needs of our learners rather than the benefit of the school. However, because of high stakes accountability, Headteachers were losing their jobs if they could not secure improvement in examination results. To me, it felt like the football manager syndrome was being applied in education – if you do not get the results, you are out. Furthermore, some schools allegedly removed low performing students from their roll prior to the January census so that they would not count in their results. Such decisions were certainly not always in the best interest of the child concerned, especially as many would be the most vulnerable in the school. Clearly, some school leaders were pressured into making decisions that morally they would rather not. This moral dilemma was a perverse side effect of successive governments pinning so much on examination results. Heads were making decision that benefited the school over the specific needs of individual students and, in particular, the most vulnerable.

Generally, I achieved year on year improvement in results in my schools with two exceptions. On both occasions I felt the intense pressure of high stakes accountability and the potential for my job being at risk. In both cases it was the second year of my tenure when I had introduced broad sweeping changes due to the school being in special measures. The students resented the fact that all the changes had come too late for them to benefit and kicked back. Too many of the cohort lacked focus and did not care about their examination results. Furthermore, more time was needed for the benefits of the improvements to impact on results. But in the high stakes accountability environment, one set of poor results was unacceptable. In the first instance my job was seriously under threat – the results were seen as failure and my leadership seriously came into question. On the second occasion, the governors fully understood the situation and could see the

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improvements in the school and knew it would take longer for this to translate into results. A year later we delivered the best results the school had ever seen. So, whilst I can see that accountability has its place, there must be a measured approach. I did not suddenly become a bad Head when results dipped and yet, many senior leader's careers have been ended in such circumstances. The fortunes of a school often fluctuate over time for multifarious reasons and we need to be prepared to look below the surface and understand the reasons why this has happened. When a school finds itself in difficulty it needs to be given time to improve and Ofsted, RSCs and governors need to appreciate this.

To conclude this section, the net result of high stakes accountability has been a breakdown in trust between the DfE and school leaders. Over time, the government removed what they perceived to be 'tricks' used by schools to boost results. In many ways, this was questioning the integrity of school leaders. Students could no longer resit exams several times to secure the best grades and coursework elements were removed from most subjects. The perception from government was that both were being exploited by schools to gain advantage. To my mind, the loss of coursework was a great pity. No doubt, for some students, drafting and redrafting a piece of work suited their way of learning and demonstrates a skill set that has value in higher education and employment. On the other hand, some students are better suited to terminal exams and perform better in that environment. I think a blended approach would be fairer in meeting the needs of all learners but this would require the government to show greater trust in schools. Similarly, many of the BTEC and NVQ qualifications were removed from the approved subjects for league tables. Unsurprisingly, schools stopped using these qualifications. Some of these actions by government were justified given the 'gaming' that some schools employed. Although I fully believe that accountability is a crucial part of effective school leadership, perhaps this is the time to reassess the high stakes accountability process and rebuild trust in school leaders.

HIGH STAKES ACCOUNTABILITY – OFSTED

I started teaching in 1984 when there was no Ofsted and no league tables. I am not sure what levels of accountability existed back then but believe it was minimal. Schools were free to teach what they wanted how they wanted. Ofsted inspections began in 1992 and I was involved in six full inspections and a further eight monitoring visits as a Head. Despite my experience of inspection, they did not get any easier and always struck fear into my heart when the call came. I am sure that I am not alone in that respect.

I have no doubt that Ofsted has made a significant difference to standards in our schools. As part of the government policy to give parents greater choice, it was

vital that they could make an informed decision. Ofsted have created expectations around the standards in schools, transparency about how schools are performing and introduced a structure by which school leaders could be held to account. It is highly appropriate and necessary that an independent body provides feedback to evaluate how well schools are performing and inform them about their strengths and weaknesses. Such evaluation and feedback are crucial to provide the challenge necessary to raise standards over time. The difficulty to my mind is the criteria used to make these judgements; who decides what good and outstanding education looks like and to what extent is this based on sound research? In many respects, it has often reflected the preferences of the Secretary of State and/or the HMCI of the time.

One problem facing successive HMCIs has been to ensure fairness with the inspection process. With so many different inspectors making judgements about the strengths and weaknesses of schools, ensuring objectivity has been problematic especially as so much can ride on the judgements made. Hence, inspectors undergo a huge amount of training to ensure consistency and accuracy in their judgements plus, inspections are quality assured by senior HMIs. Schools have the right of appeal the judgements made and I know of examples where this has been successful. Finally, there are very comprehensive criteria for each grade and each section of the inspection framework to give transparency to the whole process. This latter point has its own inherent weaknesses in three main ways. Firstly, as a Head it sometimes felt like we were standing on ever shifting sand as the criteria in the framework changed to reflect the preferences of the current HMCI or the policies of the Secretary of State. Furthermore, it became increasingly evident that Ofsted was being used to reinforce government policies which made long-term planning incredibly difficult. For example, in 2003, when I first became a Headteacher, there was a huge range of criteria and separate judgements based around Every Child Matters. To be successful in their inspection, schools needed to ensure that the criteria in this framework were being met. Contrast this with the framework under the Coalition government when the framework was completely changed to reflect Michael Gove's preferences for education. Consequently, school planning needed to change to reflect the demands of the new framework. Michael Gove wanted all students to study an academic curriculum and introduced the EBacc. Whilst schools were not compelled to deliver this curriculum, not doing so was seen as lacking ambition, one of the key criteria under the Leadership and Management section of the framework. Following the London Riots of 2011, the Coalition government's focus turned to the 'moral malaise' in British society. Schools were required to teach about British values and this was introduced to the Ofsted framework and, correspondingly, schools added it to their curriculum.

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The Ofsted framework has also influenced how teachers teach. Students making progress is obviously very important but, at one time, Ofsted looked for progress to be made in every lesson they observed. If not, the lesson could not be judged good. Any understanding of how we learn would show that learning is not a linear process. Concepts, knowledge and skills take time to embed and can take longer than one lesson for this to be evident. As a result of this granular focus on progress, teachers went into assessment for learning overdrive and constantly checked for progress throughout their lessons. We saw thumbs up, mini-white boards, scaling and multiple mini-plenaries – all of which have their place but it needs to be at the appropriate time. It felt like we were ‘weighing the pig’ but, due to Ofsted’s focus, we all fell in line. Evidently, the Ofsted framework has often been used as a control and compliance vehicle by government. School leaders have changed what was taught and how it was taught to ensure they were following the expectations of Ofsted. This clearly has been necessary in some instances if we consider the importance of safeguarding and addressing issues like off-rolling and gaming. However, it has also meant that what constitutes a good or better school has changed over time. Hence, a school could be graded good under one framework but, even if nothing else changed, suddenly find they are RI a few years later under a revised framework with a different focus.

This leads to my second point; I wonder if the restrictions created by the very rigid and specific criteria in the Ofsted framework have stifled the ability of schools to creatively meet the broader needs of their students. I once worked with a potential academy sponsor who wanted the focus of the school to be critical thinking. He believed that to prepare students for adulthood it was vital that they were taught to think for themselves. Surely, part of the purpose of education should be to help students think and reason so that they can apply good judgement and make effective decisions. Yet very few schools would include philosophy or critical thinking on their curriculum in any meaningful way if it was not perceived by Ofsted to be relevant. I once favoured ‘learning to learn’ and introduced a very radical curriculum into Year 7 and 8. Students were involved in project-based learning and we developed a meta-cognitive framework to underpin the curriculum. Dr James Manion and Kate McAllister, who led this programme, have written about the positive impact this had on learners’ outcomes in their book, *Fear is in the Mind*. At the time, the school was emerging from special measures and subject to regular monitoring visits. Although the HMI who led all the inspections liked what we were offering, some of his colleagues, did not. It certainly would not be popular now with Ofsted’s current focus on a knowledge base curriculum and yet it was successful. Despite huge efforts to make inspections objective, personal preference and subjectivity are almost impossible to eliminate. Hence, a school could offer the

most amazingly creative and innovative curriculum but would run the risk of the disapproval of the lead inspector resulting in an adverse judgement.

Until the most recent framework, examination results have been a major driver for inspectors. This raises my third issue with the inspection process. Ofsted grades and exam results have been inextricably linked to the high stakes accountability mentioned above. Just as a poor set of results could make a Head feel vulnerable, the same could be said for an adverse inspection. Throughout this time school leaders had a sense that the HMI had already made up his or her mind before they came through the door. To exemplify this, at one point, the lead inspector would produce a pre-inspection brief (PIB) and share this with the Head before the start of the inspection. Very often the only prior information they used was the previous year's results. Whilst I agree that examination results are an extremely important indicator of a school's performance, it did feel at the time that other important factors would be lost when Ofsted was making its final judgements. This could be catastrophic for a school that experienced a dip in results the year before their inspection, especially if they fell below the floor targets. The obsession with results became most acute when inspectors started drilling down to specific groups and even sub-groups. For example, on one of my many monitoring visits, the HMI challenged me on the school's data, despite the fact our results were improving significantly. I was told that we were failing because of the performance of our high prior attaining disadvantaged white boys. To be fair, their results had been disappointing, but it was four students out of a cohort of 180. Whilst I accept that any students not performing according to their ability is unacceptable, did their results in the context of everything else we had achieved mean the school was failing? Fortunately, the most recent framework, under Amanda Spielman, switches the focus away from a dependence on examination results towards a focus on the curriculum. I think this framework is a step in the right direction not only due to the curriculum focus but also because personal development is given greater importance.

To conclude this section, as someone who started teaching before Ofsted, it has had a profound impact on standards and professionalism in education. From a time when schools were unregulated and had complete freedom of choice, Ofsted has ensured that schools understand the standards that are required and leaders are held to account for delivering those standards. In this way, parents can easily see which schools are doing well and make informed choices. However, it might be time to rethink school inspections going forward. Clearly, the degree of control and compliance has increased over time. As already stated, Secretaries of State and HMCI have used the Ofsted framework to shape education the way they think is best. Government has shown a complete lack of trust in the profession and it is questionable how much they want to consult teachers on deciding what good

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looks like in education. The medical profession is regulated by GMC with direct input from the doctors. Should it not be the same for the teaching profession? I can see three possible ways to improve the system. Firstly, rebuilding trust in the teaching profession, perhaps through organisations such as the Chartered College of Teaching, so that we determine the criteria for judging high quality education provision. If based on research and best practice, I think this would show that teachers and school leaders have very high expectations of the profession. Alternately, if the rigidity and prescription of the Ofsted framework are restricting schools from being creative, we need to strip out the prescription and adopt a minimum standard for what constitutes a good school. Removing the outstanding judgement and replacing it with a good or not good judgement has been discussed recently. Finally, rather than educational excellence being tied to the criteria in the Ofsted framework, the profession could create a process of continual improvement. As Nick Brook stated in *Improving School, A report of the School Improvement Commission*, *'High stakes accountability is a powerful tool for driving compliance to minimum standards but a poor one for creating excellence within the system'* (NAHT 2020 p. 2). If we really want to provide a world class education for our children, we may need to question whether the current processes of high stakes accountability are the best way forward.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, government policy during my 17 years as a Headteacher can be characterised by two interrelated features. Firstly, a lack of trust in the profession which led to a top-down education strategy that did not involve teachers or school leaders. This has often resulted in a high level of prescription not only from the DfE but also from some Secretaries of State who wanted their own preferences to dominate policy even if there was no research evidence to show it was best practice. I experienced a see-saw effect in education policy as successive governments had their own views on what education should look like, how to judge and measure if schools are successful and what should be included in the curriculum. Hence, the underlying issue faced by school leaders is that education policy is subject to relatively short-term planning based around parliamentary terms of office. Consequently, the Ofsted framework has been continually revised to reflect the DfE's latest thinking and policies. Most children will spend at least 14 years in the education system and yet, during this time, the Ofsted framework may have changed several times. Is this constant change really in the best interest of learners? Surely, we should be taking a much longer-term view of what we want from education for our children and young people. If we could de-politicise education, through cross party agreement, and develop a 10-year plan for education with the

profession given a large say in what is included, then we could really create a world class system and re-establish trust in the profession.

Secondly, because of this lack of trust, there was a growth of high stakes accountability which manifested in two main ways, league tables and Ofsted judgements. The introduction of league tables and test/examination results to judge the success of schools, irrespective of their local context, drove some schools to find ways to boost results, even if this was not in the best interest of the students. Ofsted has certainly contributed to improved standards and professionalism but has also led to greater prescription which could be inhibiting creativity. But is this high-stake accountability and prescription still the best way to secure future school improvement? The School Improvement Commission's report, 'Improving Schools' (2020) calls for change by, 'rebalancing holding schools to account with enabling them to improve' (p.2). It supports some of my thoughts in this paper by focusing on the importance of creating a culture of continuous improvement, not necessarily tied to Ofsted grades, and this should be a collaborative and collective endeavour. I know from my own experiences that the greatest improvement is achieved when schools learn from each other and share their expertise. It also emphasises the importance of giving time for sustainable improvement to be embedded in practice. The Island of Jersey has made a step in the right direction in this respect. Their inspection system involves a team of inspectors working with other Heads to provide an element of peer review and feedback. They do not give overall judgements but do provide high quality feedback so that school leaders know their strengths and areas for improvement. If standards are a concern, the government provides the resources and support to help secure improvements – to me it creates a win-win culture for school improvement. Let's hope that future British governments learn a lesson from Jersey.

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