

## **Ask a professor – Melanie Ehren**

### **If Ofsted was abolished (as suggested by the Green Party manifesto), what could be put in its place to quality assure schools?**

I have been asked this question many times, particularly by teachers and head teachers who feel that Ofsted does more harm than good. Many teachers and head teachers have expressed concerns over the last couple of years that Ofsted gradings of their school are inaccurate and inconsistent, and that inspectors who evaluate their school are unqualified and disrespectful and have a very formulaic view about teaching and leadership. As a result there have been debates, particularly in the run up to the last general election to abolish Ofsted altogether as it has become a brand that is somewhat poisoned.

To answer this question of whether to abolish Ofsted or not, I'd like to briefly take a step back and talk about the work of Ofsted and what we would lose if we were to abolish Ofsted.

Ofsted issues inspections of schools on a regular basis, particularly of schools where student achievement results are declining or failing. These visits result in an inspection report, describing the quality of schools on a range of indicators, such as the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and safety of children. These reports are made available to the public and parents can use the information to choose a school, while national government would also use the reports to learn about the quality of the entire education system and decide on where national policy needs to address capacity issues, such as when the performance in specific subjects is declining because of poor quality teaching or lack of qualified teachers.

If we didn't have Ofsted we would currently have external examinations and performance league tables to hold schools to account, and in addition many schools will have some kind of self-evaluation or peer review system to evaluate the quality of their school. The main driver in the quality assurance of schools would however be the national targets on student achievement results that schools have to meet, such as floor targets on the Key Stage 2 test in primary education. This would result in a test-based accountability system that primarily relies on data and student performance in cognitive subjects such as maths and literacy.

In other countries that have such test-based accountability systems we have seen how such an over reliance on data and tests can lead to teaching to the test, to very narrow curricula and root-based learning. Having inspections of schools enables us to know about the quality of schools on a range of indicators, to compare the quality of schools and to also track and compare their performance over time. Alternative systems of quality assurance, such as school self-evaluation or peer review between schools would support improvement of individual schools, but would not provide that national and comparative overview.