

Why do Ofsted inspectors observe individual lessons and how do they evaluate teaching in schools?

A summary by Mike Cladingbowl, National Director, Schools.



There are many misconceptions about why, and how, inspectors observe and gather evidence about teaching, and how that contributes to the overall judgement on the quality of teaching in a school.

Much of this arises from a lack of understanding of how the approach to inspection, and inspecting teaching, has changed over the years. Before 2009, evidence forms required inspectors to provide an overall grade for the quality of each lesson or part-lesson observed:

Judgement on the overall quality of the lesson (Leave blank when not a lesson) 1 = Outstanding, 4 = Inadequate						<input type="text"/>
Use for grades if there is sufficient evidence:						
Standards	Progress	Personal development	Teaching	Curriculum	Care, guidance & support	Leadership & management
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Particular evaluations related to safety, health, enjoyment, contribution to the community, economic well-being						
<input type="text"/>						

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Typically, inspectors would visit a series of lessons or parts of lessons, gathering evidence on different and observable elements – teaching, standards and so on – and the lesson grades awarded would be collated and used to arrive at overall judgements about the school.

Since 2009, inspectors have been instructed not to grade the overall quality of a lesson they visit. As you can see from the most recent version of the form (below), the box for a graded 'judgement on the overall quality of the lesson' has been removed.

Evaluation						
<input type="text"/>						
Use for grades if there is sufficient evidence:					Time spent in this lesson (mins)	
Achievement of pupils	<input type="text"/>	Quality of teaching	<input type="text"/>	Running EF?		Y N
Behaviour and safety of pupils	<input type="text"/>	Leadership and management	<input type="text"/>	No of lessons included in running EF		<input type="text"/>
NQT	<input type="text"/>	ITE route	<input type="text"/>	If yes, cumulative time (mins)		<input type="text"/>
ITE provider			<input type="text"/>	Special focus, complete if necessary		<input type="text"/>

In the current form, there is a box to grade quality of teaching and it is here that much of the confusion lies. Inspectors may use this box to record judgements gathered from a wide variety of sources – not just lesson observations – for example, when looking at pupils' work or when looking at marking.

So why do we observe lessons at all?

It's just one piece of a jigsaw of evidence about the work of the school that includes: the school's own observations and self-evaluation, joint visits to classrooms with the headteacher or other staff, evidence about how teaching has improved, the quality of work seen in books, teachers' marking, discussions with pupils and staff and, of course, test results and so on. In my view, inspectors must always spend time in classrooms when they inspect. It's where the main business of the school happens. But the way we use the evidence we gather in classrooms has changed.

Why is this change important?

Inspectors do not judge the overall lesson. But it is still possible for an inspector to record a graded evaluation on an evidence form under one or more of the four main judgement headings, including teaching, where there is sufficiently compelling evidence gathered by observing routines, looking in books, listening to students and so on. It might be possible, for example, to see evidence of the impact of a recent decision taken by the leadership, which has improved behaviour.

But this is categorically not the same as judging a teacher, or even the teaching, and especially not a lesson overall, by evaluating the performance of the teacher in a lesson or a part of a lesson. Making a judgement about the quality of teaching, based on a wide variety of evidence gathered in the classroom and elsewhere, is not the same as judging how well a teacher performed. I know this may sound like splitting hairs – but it is an important difference.

Inspectors should not grade an aspect such as teaching, unless circumstances are exceptional, without considering the broad range of evidence that they can gather during a visit to a lesson – for example, the behaviour of the students and how well they are managed, subject knowledge, the standard of work completed in books, the quality of marking and so on – and use this to come to a view about what teaching is like for those students and its impact on their learning over time.

I was speaking to a colleague today, one of Her Majesty's Inspectors. He reminded me it is all about outcomes and that it does work both ways. In a classroom he was in recently, a teacher produced, literally, an all-singing, all-dancing lesson. There was music, comedy, costumes, games, 'thinking hats', and all with clear objectives on the whiteboard. He recorded a teaching quality grade of inadequate. Not because of the 'performance' on the day but because students' graffiti-strewn books hadn't been marked for six months and work was shoddy or incomplete. In contrast, he graded teaching as outstanding in a classroom where students sat reading in silence because of the exceptional quality of students' work and the teacher's marking in exercise books. He told both teachers what his conclusions were.

Moreover, inspectors will visit lessons for a variety of reasons. This can include looking at whether good literacy is promoted, to check on particular students' standards, following a group of students to check on their attitudes to learning in different contexts, or how effectively additional staff support students with special educational needs. They can also gather evidence about teaching outside of lessons – and frequently do – by speaking to students, looking at planning, undertaking work scrutiny and talking to senior leaders.

And however the evidence about teaching across the school is gathered and evaluated, inspectors must not simply aggregate the grades awarded when evaluating teaching. It says this very clearly in the published handbook for inspectors. They must take a view based on what they have seen in the school during the inspection alongside, for example, the school's own view of teaching across the school and other performance data.

So in short:

- Inspectors should not give an overall grade for the lesson and nor should teachers expect one.
- If asked, inspectors will provide feedback to individuals on what they have observed, including the evidence they have gathered about teaching.
- They can share the grade for the evidence gathered about teaching, or other aspects, with an individual teacher. In most instances, it should include evidence about what is routine rather than one-off.
- Inspectors must ensure that this feedback does not seem to constitute a view about whether the teacher is a 'good' teacher or otherwise, or if they 'taught a good lesson' or otherwise. The feedback they give is confidential.
- Teachers need to understand this too, as they often clamour to know what 'grade' they got. I understand why they want to know, and it can be difficult to differentiate between a grade for teaching and a grade for the teacher. I accept that we may need to do more here.
- Evidence gathered directly or indirectly about individual teachers by inspectors should never be used by the school for performance management purposes.
- Inspection is about evaluating the quality of education provided by the school, by considering a range of evidence, and not about evaluating, individually or collectively, the performance of teachers through short lesson observations.

Too often, it seems to me, inspectors' visits to lessons are confused with the ones carried out by headteachers whose purpose may be to identify professional development needs or performance management. This is particularly the case with newly qualified teachers, where inspectors and course tutors or mentors are not gathering evidence for the same purpose. Inspectors need to know what the quality of teaching is like across a whole school, and how teachers are supported.

On average, inspectors may spend only 25 minutes or so in each lesson. It would be nonsensical to suggest that an Ofsted inspector could give a definitive validation of a teacher's professional competency in such a short time. We are not in the business of handing out badges that say 'You are an outstanding teacher' or the opposite. We leave that to others, who will use their own and other evidence to come to a conclusion. We would not expect any other professional, for example a surgeon, to be judged by peers on a single 25 minute observation of their work.

We have set much of this out in in our inspection handbook and guidance to schools and inspectors alike. But, if needed, we will revisit this in the next few weeks to make it clearer still for inspectors, teachers and heads.

Finally, if instructing inspectors to feed back on the range of evidence used to arrive at a judgement without giving a numerical teaching 'grade' would help, or even removing the grade for teaching on the evidence form altogether, then I am prepared to consider it. We might, for instance, just ask inspectors to note all their evidence gathered about teaching, and then bring it all together at the end of the inspection in a plenary before discussing the single overall judgement on teaching with the school.

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