



Hampshire

IMPACT OF OFSTED ON THE HEALTH & WELLBEING OF SCHOOL STAFF:

A research report commissioned by the
National Education Union, Hampshire Branch
supported by the University of Huddersfield



University of
HUDDERSFIELD
Inspiring global professionals



Huddersfield Centre
for Research in
Education and Society



CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Methodology	4
Part One -	
Survey of school leaders	5
Data Collection	6
Findings	7
Synthesis	11
Discussion	12
Summary	15
Limitations and Further Research	15
Part Two -	
Lego Serious play workshops	16
Data collection	17
Findings	18
Discussion	22
Summary	25
Part Three -	
Conclusion and Recommendations	26
References	29
Appendix 1	30
Appendix 2	31

INTRODUCTION

National inspection regimes have long been positioned as levers for school improvement (Chapman & Earley, 2010). In the English context, Ofsted functions as both high-stakes accountability and a public judge of schools, with significant consequences for leadership, workforce morale, and community perception (Perryman, 2006; Perryman et al.; 2017). Reid (2018 & 2024) explored teacher's experience of inspection in England through the lens of an ethic of care. There is a growing discourse of discontent in the English school system about the impact of Ofsted on the wellbeing of the workforce, which was amplified by the death of headteacher, Ruth Perry in 2023. Consequently, the Hampshire branch of the National Education Union commissioned the University of Huddersfield to conduct this research.

This report presents the findings from two populations of teacher professionals, surveying them about the impact of Ofsted on the wellbeing of the profession from their experience of being inspected. The first to be surveyed were school leaders and the second sample researched were teachers and support staff. Each set of data is discursively interpreted within this report and discussed with reference to the literature. A conclusion completes the report.

METHODOLOGY

Design and method of research

This research project employed two methods for gathering data in relation to its research questions. Each method was used to maximise benefit from the circumstance of 'interviewing' the two samples of interviewees. One sample was school leaders, and semi-structured one-to-one interviews were carried out with 24 individuals. The other sample was 42 teachers and support staff who attended two group workshops, where the method of 'Lego® Serious Play' was used. Data was analysed thematically.

Semi-structured interviews

Snowball sampling technique was used to determine the sample of school leaders surveyed and to achieve agreement to participate in a 90 minute to two hour interview. All gave informed consent to be interviewed and were assured confidentiality regarding anything they said in the interview. A sample of 26 school leaders agreed to take part in the study, however, two subsequently withdrew from participating, citing reasons of insecurity about it becoming known that they had participated; one cited Ofsted Inspector terms and conditions when withdrawing.

The question protocol of the semi-structured interviews is reported in the appendix to this report.

Lego Serious Play workshops

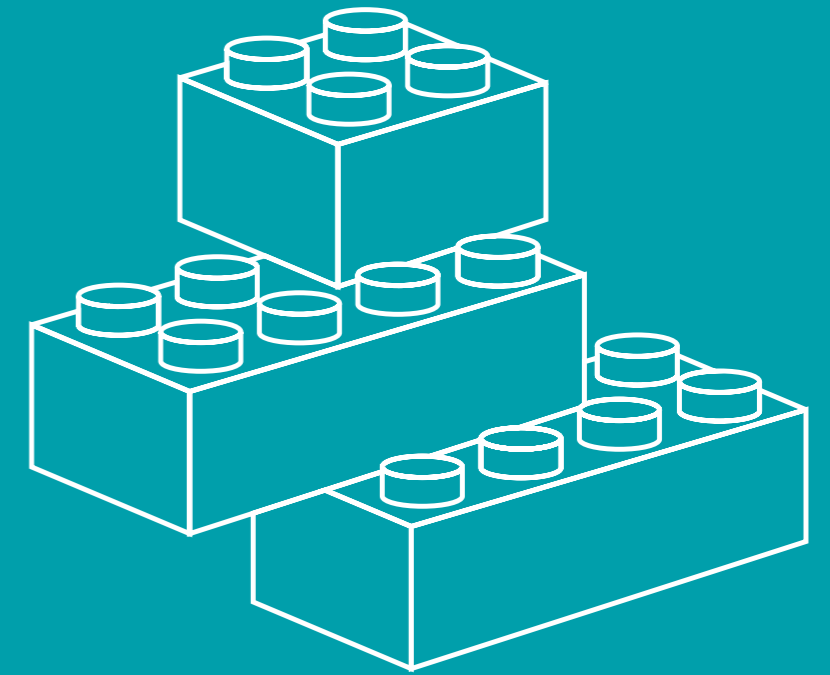
The sample of participants attending the lego workshops were drawn from teachers and support staff working in schools in the county of Hampshire and an invitation to attend was disseminated into schools through NEU communication channels as well as social media. All gave informed consent to participate and anonymity in their taking part was assured.

The two Lego workshops were facilitated by Dr James Reid, of the University of Huddersfield. The method enables participants to 'think with their hands'. Artistic perfection is not the goal as participants use the Lego to build a response to the direction/question given by the facilitator. This was done in groups of six or seven. Each member of the group builds their model in response to the stimulation provided by the facilitator. Having built their model, a metaphor for the experience of inspection, the group discusses what has been built. The research team recorded the dialogue and took photos of the Lego constructions. The verbatim comments made by participants and the photographs make up the evidence collected. This method of research matters because it enables participants to express emotions, trauma and meaning that are often suppressed or sanitised in formal feedback.

A detailed outline of the facilitation of the two workshops is given in the appendix to this report.

Quality assurance of research practice

The above design and method was ethically approved by University of Huddersfield. The research team was supervised by Dr James Reid of the University. The team also engaged the services of external adviser, consultant Adele Deasey.



PART ONE

Survey of School Leaders

DATA COLLECTION

The data from twenty one leaders was initially codified using thematic analysis. Twenty two themes were identified and then reviewed and sorted into five key areas of concern, or meta-themes:

1. Process & structural issues
2. Credibility & capability of inspectors
3. Power dynamics & behaviour
4. Impact on people & culture
5. Forward thinking

Appendix 2 provides detail about how the initial codes were used to sort the data into the five meta-themes.

Considering these five meta-themes chronologically provides a systemic overview, where **process** equates to how the mechanism works and the data connected with **credibility** gives evidence about who is running the process (mechanism) and how competent they are. An interpretation of data in connection with **power** finds how relationships **impact** on the process and potentially distorts it, and the subsequent meta-theme of impact finds what is happening to human beings. All these interpretations come from the evidence of school leaders in what they told the research team. The final theme draws on the expressed thinking of the interviewees about the future and what they think needs to change.

Such systemic consideration of the five meta-themes enables an analysis that resonates with Fortune and Peters' (1995) systems approach for learning from failure. Their model can be presented as: Inputs → actors → behaviours → outcomes → redesign, and has informed our analysis of the research data and interpretation of the evidence. We therefore turn to our findings.



FINDINGS

The findings reveal a systemic pattern of dysfunction in the contemporary inspection regime, characterised by process failures, variable inspector capability, distortive power dynamics, and significant harm to professional wellbeing, leadership culture and organisational sustainability. While pockets of positive experience exist, they are exceptional rather than systemic. The data suggests that the current framework is structurally incapable of ensuring fair, contextualised, humane, or developmental inspection.

Our findings are presented under the five meta-themes:

1. Process & Structural Issues

1.1 Blindness to Context

Participants described a regime that was consistently blind to local context, especially in complex settings (SEND, rural disadvantage, specialist provision, small schools). Evidence shows inspectors applying a uniform mainstream template, with little regard for community, pupil profiles, or structural constraints.

“Context was never considered.”

“They ignored (impact of) extreme behaviours.”

“They didn’t understand rural deprivation.”

Schools reported that successful inspection required presenting an idealised façade rather than reality, with more than one referring to an “Instagram version of the school” as a protective performance. The logic of the process incentivises image over honesty.

1.2 High-stakes, rigid structures

The inspection framework was portrayed as structurally inflexible, with grades effectively pre-capped, “no grade jumps allowed”, and “blocked by two words”. Leaders

described moving goalposts, contradictory expectations, and a tick-box logic that can “overnight legitimise or undermine all prior work”. The stakes were consistently described as disproportionate, transforming inspection into a binary, existential test rather than a professional dialogue.

“It legitimises or undermines years of work overnight.”

Several participants framed current practice as a market mechanism rather than a public learning tool, driven by the pursuit of a “kite mark” rather than sustainable improvement.

1.3 Predetermined outcomes

Participants repeatedly asserted that outcomes were decided before inspectors arrived, often through a 90-minute pre-inspection call, historical data, or contextual assumptions. Leaders commonly described a one-way interpretative process where inspectors’ initial hypothesis governed subsequent evidence selection.

“The report was written before seeing us.”

“You pray you get someone who will listen.”

A minority of inspectors were described as fighting against the reductive metric, especially where published data contradicted lived improvement. This was presented as evidence that the mechanism overrides professional judgment, even internally to Ofsted.

1.4 Rushed methodology and suspending learning to service the inspection

The inspection methodology was described as compressed, snapshot-based, with notably insufficient time on site (e.g. ten hours, conversations with four students, no book scrutiny) and late entry into critical classes (phonics observed in final minutes). For small schools, the disruption was

profound: leaders were forced to suspend normal provision to service the inspection.

“It wasn’t a normal day; we had to suspend everything.”

Short-notice inspections created continuous low-grade stress, replacing short intense build-ups with year-round physiological alertness.

1.5 Secrecy & procedural opacity, and weaponising of safeguarding

Participants repeatedly described a culture of secrecy, in which leaders were silenced, unable to speak openly about the process, and at times barred from sharing even anonymised discussion outcomes. The complaint process was widely viewed as procedural theatre, with 30-day delays, word limits, no feedback, and instances where complaints were validated but not applied.

“Complaints went nowhere.”
“Forced into silence.”

Equally, safeguarding was repeatedly cited as a weaponised lever rather than a substantive review of practice. Participants reported technical downgrades, disproportionate scrutiny, and fear of manipulated safeguarding narratives.

1.6 Market logic embedded in appraisal

Inspection outcomes were described as a market signal with direct consequences for enrolment, admissions freezes, re-brokerage, and forced academisation. Leaders described inspection as a sorting mechanism in a competitive system:

“What is Ofsted regulating – the market?”

For many, this logic has replaced the public good, aligning schooling with sales cultures, parental choice and comparative metrics. This was especially intensified for schools serving disadvantaged communities, which face steeper gradients under identical criteria.

2. Credibility & Capability of Inspectors

2.1 Inconsistency as a defining feature

Participants described a system in which outcomes are highly dependent on the quality, experience, and personality of the inspection team. The phrase “all about the team” recurred frequently in the leaders’ evaluation of their inspection experiences. Variation included not just technical inconsistency, but also subjective agendas, selective inquiry, and “breathtaking arrogance”.

“We were f***ed over by Ofsted.”
“Good teams listen; others are tone deaf.”

The integrity of the experience depended on whether the lead inspector was open-minded, humane, and professionally secure, or punitive, pre-decided, and uninterested.

2.2 Expertise gaps

Many leaders stated that inspection teams lacked relevant expertise, especially in SEND, early years, small schools, and specialist practice. Specific examples included inspectors without primary experience judging mixed EYFS/Y1 provision, and ignorance of widely used phonics programmes.

“The inspector was not knowledgeable... nothing led to improvement.”

When expertise was lacking, inspectors often fell back on personal preference, framework literalism, or generic judgement language.

2.3 Credibility erosion

Longitudinal accounts (e.g., 30-year careers) showed a marked erosion in confidence in the regulator. Early HMIs were perceived as aware of their influence, whereas later cohorts were described as younger, churned, and instrumentalised by a system that reduces schools to metrics rather than judgement.

“It eroded my confidence in the regulator over my career.”

A methodology rooted in flawed evidence collection and formulaic interpretation erodes the credibility of inspection outcomes.

3. Power Dynamics & Behaviour

3.1 Intimidation and unprofessional conduct

Several participants described inspectors cancelling breaks, ignoring bereavements, or behaving with hostility and coldness. One HMI was described as a “rottweiler”, another as “nasty”, and reports included menacing behaviours towards governors and staff.

“Really inhumane, utterly disempowering.”

Lived accounts include inspectors ranting about hotel plumbing, entering in foul moods, and projecting emotional states onto the inspection environment – all without professional accountability.

3.2 Asymmetrical power

A recurring feature was the total power imbalance between inspectors and leaders. Several participants described managing inspectors’ emotions, flattering egos, or acting as the “lead inspector’s little helper” in order to protect the school.

“You have to know your place.”

Inspection was framed as a performance of subordination, where truth is declared, not established, and leaders must portray compliance to secure fair treatment. Safeguarding was cited as an intimidatory device, with threats implied through questioning. The result is fear-based compliance, not honest professional exchange.

4. Impact on People & Culture

4.1 Trauma and harm

The emotional and physical impact of inspection was a dominant, consistent theme across the dataset. Leaders described:

- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- blood pressure medication
- absence due to mental health
- sleeplessness
- tearfulness over trivial triggers
- collapse of identity
- “still carrying the impact years later”

“The entire team were emotional wrecks.”
“I still carry the mental health impact.”

Staff described intensity leading to breakdown, with children themselves distressed by inspector presence. The data includes trauma narratives in schools with good outcomes: even where the inspection was positive, the prolonged emotional flattening, loss of motivation, and interruption to family life were substantial.

“Afterwards, even though it was a good outcome, we felt flat for two terms.”

4.2 Career damage and exits

Several participants reported colleagues leaving the profession, forced resignations, and careers ending due to inspection outcomes, including senior leaders placed by local authorities then swiftly removed when outcomes dipped. The metaphor of “scalps” was deployed to describe accountability culture.

“I saw heads sacked after inspections.”

Inspections in challenging contexts were experienced as unwinnable, reinforcing exit decisions and driving talent out of the system.

4.3 Continuous fear

Leaders reported a continuous low-grade fear that inspection could cost them their

job, house, car, reinforcing a permanent state of vigilance. Even saying that being given the judgement grade of, “outstanding is a sword of Damocles.” CEOs also described fear of institutional backlash and protection of personal reputation within the sector.

4.4 Cultural distortion

The evidence finds that inspection has re-shaped the culture of schooling, incentivising:

- performativity over authenticity
- image management over learning
- compliance over curiosity
- survival over collaboration

Schools “resent high outcomes” because they lead to increased demands, not support. Market pressure was said to kill collaboration, and weaponise complaints.

Several participants described a culture where inspection is performative theatre, not a learning process.

5. Forward Thinking

5.1 Appetite for systemic change

Across the dataset, participants expressed a strong belief that the current system is broken beyond incremental reform. They argued for inspection to:

- shift from single-school judgement to system-level oversight (MAT/LA)
- incorporate peer review with HMI assurance
- focus on system forces rather than symptoms
- recognise social inequality as central
- re-establish education as public good, not market product
- redefine the purpose of regulation

“The system, process, and framework are broken.”

5.2 Supportive inspection as a concept

Leaders expressed support for accountability in principle, but described the current

mechanism as distorted, extractive, and psychologically unsafe. Several suggested that subject-expert inspectors previously added value, and that collaborative, developmental models could rebuild trust. The question “Is Ofsted needed?” emerged organically, particularly among leaders with 30-year experience, who see normalisation as a barrier to imagining alternatives.

“It is time to fundamentally redefine the purpose of regulation.”

5.3 Positive wellbeing examples

Positive wellbeing narratives were exceptional, not normalised. Notably, a single positive case involved flexibility around reporting deadlines allowing a residential trip, and one participant praised external support services (Education Support), rather than Ofsted interventions, stating, “Six sessions with Education Support were wonderful.”

SYNTHESIS

These findings depict an inspection regime that no longer operates as a professional quality assurance process, but as a high-stakes, market-driven performance in which:

- processes are structurally flawed
- inspector capability is inconsistent
- power dynamics are distorted
- harm is significant and normalised
- the profession has adapted through fear

Across diverse contexts, leaders describe enduring psychological strain, distortion of professional priorities, and systemic mistrust. The data shows deep scepticism that incremental reform can address foundational flaws, with participants advocating radical system redesign aligned with public service rather than competitive ideology.

In summary, the evidence indicates that the inspection regime contributes to:

- the erosion of professional confidence
- destabilisation of leadership capacity
- inequality between schools
- loss of talent
- permanent stress responses
- reduced educational innovation
- market-driven behaviour
- performative compliance

These effects are not isolated incidents, but systemic outcomes arising from the design and culture of inspection. The data supports calls for a fundamental re-examination of the purpose, methods, and accountability structures of school regulation.



DISCUSSION

The findings presented above contribute to a growing body of scholarship that questions the legitimacy, fairness and purpose of high-stakes inspection regimes in education systems structured around market logics and performance metrics. The experiences reported by school leaders in this study illustrate the systemic consequences of a framework that has gradually shifted from professional quality assurance to competitive evaluation, with profound implications for teaching culture, leadership practice, and staff wellbeing.

Accountability and the Market Logic of Schooling

The data supports the view that English school accountability has become entangled with market ideology (Ball, 2008; Ozga, 2009). Leaders' descriptions of inspection as a "kite mark", a signal for parental choice, or a determinant of admissions, funding, and survival echo Perryman's (2006) argument that Ofsted has been central to the manufacture of competition between schools.

In this context, inspection ceases to be a mechanism for learning or improvement and becomes instead a technology of regulation and ranking. The normalisation of market logic is clear when headteachers describe their role as akin to "a sales team", or when outcomes are experienced as career-defining commodities rather than a basis for collective reflection. What emerges is a model of accountability that privileges image over substance, and stability over innovation, creating incentives to perform in proving mode, rather than an improving one.

The Emotional Regime of Inspection

The findings are consistent with research on the affective dimensions of accountability

(Perryman et al., 2017; Calvert et al., 2025), showing how inspection systems generate psychological strain, identity disturbance and somatic consequences. The accounts of PTSD, sleeplessness, sustained anxiety, and physical symptoms demonstrate that inspection functions as an emotional regime, in which the physiology of the leader becomes a consequential target of accountability.

Importantly, this study shows that trauma is not limited to negative judgements. Even leaders with positive outcomes describe prolonged emotional flatness, loss of motivation, and disruption to personal relationships. This indicates it is the process itself, rather than the result, that is experienced as harmful. Longitudinal narratives from leaders who have "grown up" with Ofsted show that stress responses become internalised, creating a permanent anticipatory vigilance that outlasts any individual inspection episode. Such a sustained hyper-vigilant state has serious implications for not only health, but for leadership sustainability and retention.

Inspection as a Power Relationship

A central finding is that the inspection encounter is characterised by structural asymmetry, where knowledge, interpretation and authority are located almost entirely with the inspector. This aligns with Foucauldian analyses of inspection as a disciplinary technology, whereby leaders are required to perform deference to hierarchy, compliance and emotional management of inspectors to secure fair treatment (Thompson, 2010).

School leaders reporting the need to "flatter the ego" of the lead inspector or to act as the "little helper" points to a significant professional degradation. Instead of two professionals engaging in a structured

evaluation of practice, the encounter becomes a one-way assertion of truth with little scope for dissent. This confirms concerns raised by Baxter (2017) about the monological nature of inspection narratives, where the school's voice is present only insofar as it aligns with the inspector's interpretation.

Variability and Questions of Expertise

The dataset reveals high variability in inspector capability, including gaps in subject knowledge, SEND expertise and contextual understanding. Calvert et al. (2025) found a perception that inspectors were inconsistent and lacked the necessary expertise to make their judgements. The leaders in this study reported that everything depends on the lead inspector, and that the personality of the team creates hugely divergent experiences. This is not merely perceived inconsistency; it fundamentally undermines legitimacy. As one head described: *"80% is reliant on the inspector's pre-judgment."*

While variability in human judgement is inevitable, the findings suggest a systemic absence of calibration, compounded by shortened inspection windows and compressed evidence-gathering methods. Where judgements hinge on brief snapshots, the claim to valid, reliable evaluation is significantly weakened.

The Normalisation of Harm

One striking contribution of this study is the way it exposes the normalisation of harm within the profession. Participants speak with fluency and resignation about inspection-induced illness: "national scandal", "PTSD", "scrapheap of good people". The language suggests that trauma is expected, even when unacknowledged. This aligns with work on moral injury in public service (Kerasidou & Kingori, 2019), where individuals experience a breach of professional values at the hands of

the system they serve.

In this context, the question "Is Ofsted needed?" does not emerge from defensive leaders seeking insulation from scrutiny, but from deep moral concern about an accountability model perceived as actively damaging the profession it regulates. That such questioning emerges from leaders with decades of experience and multiple outstanding judgments is significant: their critique is rooted in loyalty to the public good, not hostility to oversight.

Public Good vs. Market Evaluation

A recurring narrative contrasts education for the public good with education as an evaluative product. Leaders express dismay that management accounting logic has displaced values such as safeguarding dignity, equity, and collaborative improvement. The use of safeguarding as a weapon, or complaints as strategic leverage, reflects a wider erosion of relational ethics in favour of performative compliance.

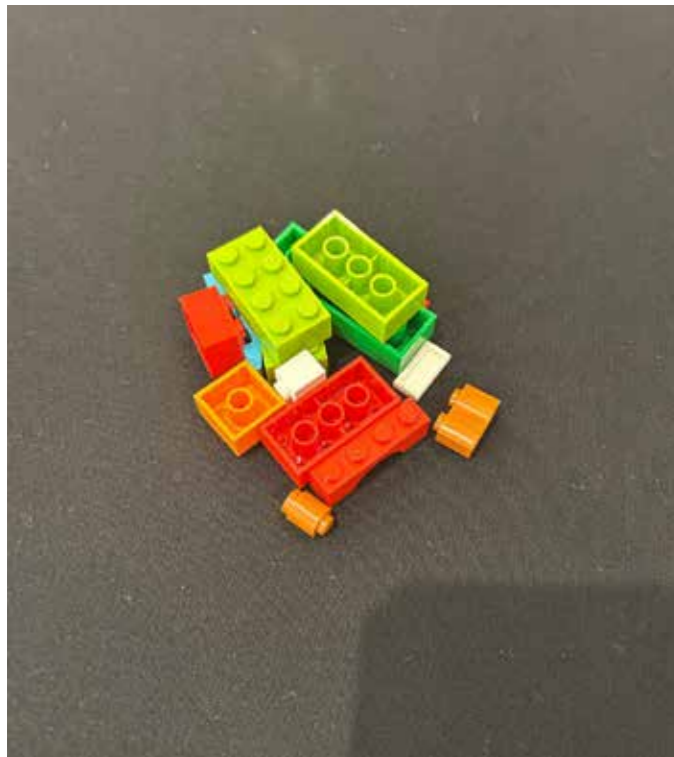
This raises the question of what kind of system-level accountability can restore the public mission of education. Participants tend to favour multi-level oversight, peer review, and HMI quality assurance, moving away from single-school 'snapshots', which they see as obsolete in a landscape dominated by MATs.

Imagining Alternatives

The findings suggest that meaningful reform will require a redefinition of the purpose of inspection, not merely a new framework. Leaders overwhelmingly reject incremental policy change, describing the framework as a secondary symptom of a deeper system design issue. In this respect, the study supports calls for systemic redesign rather than framework revision.

Interestingly, participants describe the

process of imagining “post-Ofsted futures” as personally liberating. This indicates the depth of cognitive normalisation around inspection and suggests that professional culture may be ready for paradigm shift, provided space is created for alternative imaginaries and collective design processes.



SUMMARY

Our findings from what the school leaders:

- confirm that high-stakes inspection fosters performativity, fear, and identity distortion (Ball; Perryman).
- that this is extended by articulating the embodied, physiological impacts of continuous inspection outcome alertness.
- Ofsted highlights market logic, not as abstract policy but as a lived organisational reality affecting admissions, funding, careers, and personal security.
- reiterates evidence about inspectors’ emotional conduct, and the requirement to manage inspector wellbeing as a hidden workstream.
- foregrounds the erosion of trust over three decades, showing how legitimacy has weakened over time even among “successful” leaders.

This is a significant contribution because this dataset illuminates the ‘toxic’ (Calvert et al, 2025) interpersonal and emotional regime that sustains the system. Our research highlights a fundamental contradiction at the heart of the inspection system: the mechanism designed to guarantee public trust appears to be eroding professional confidence, destabilising leadership capacity, and undermining the public mission of schooling. The evidence suggests that the harm is not accidental, but structural, arising from a design philosophy that treats education as a competitive commodity rather than a collective societal good.

Participants express an appetite for alternative accountability models, grounded in peer evaluation, contextual intelligence, wellbeing, and public value. The challenge, therefore, is not to tweak the framework, but to redesign the system, shifting from a market logic to one centred on collaborative professionalism and the wellbeing of both staff and students.

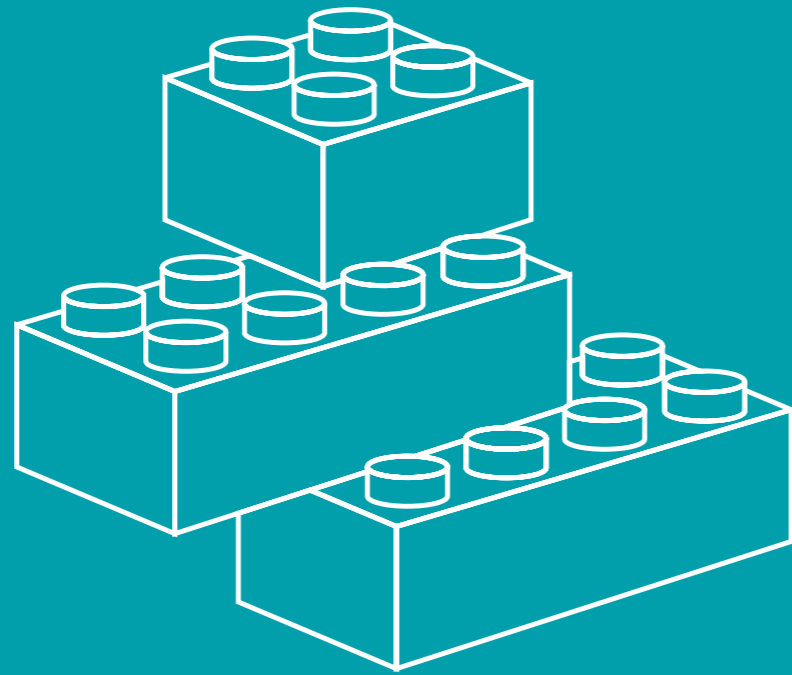
Limitations and Further Research

We acknowledge that this study, while broad in depth and perspective, is based on qualitative data from school leaders, including serving and previously serving inspectors, the research does not capture the perspectives of:

- Ofsted management
- policymakers
- classroom teachers not involved in inspection (although the study does now go on to do so)
- parents and communities

Future research would benefit from multi-perspective designs, as well as participatory approaches, to co-design more relationally grounded accountability models. The evidence also indicates a need for research into long-term health outcomes of high-stakes accountability regimes, and comparative work with systems using developmental inspection models.





PART TWO

Lego Serious Play Workshops

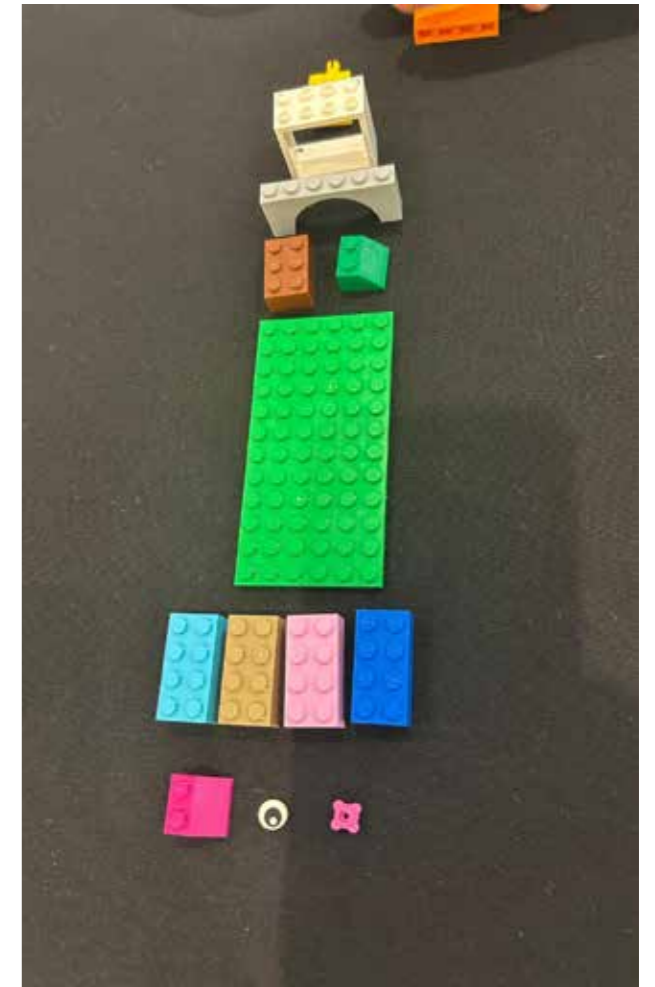
DATA COLLECTION

LEGO Serious Play workshops, one in Fareham and one in Winchester, with six groups of participants generated 250 statements. 100 Lego builds were observed. Participants in the workshops included classroom teachers, EYFS staff, heads of department across support staff across multiple schools and MATs. The evidence captures emotions, feelings and meaning expressed by the participants that are often suppressed or sanitised in formal feedback. The data reveals consistent patterns across the groups of participants.

AI collated the verbatim statements and found that participants consistently reported that Ofsted:

- damages teacher wellbeing and mental health,
- undermines professional identity and autonomy,
- generates fear, trauma, and family-level strain,
- distorts inclusion and SEND support,
- incentivises performative practices over learning,
- suppresses teacher voice instead of empowering improvement,
- erodes trust in the profession,
- has no meaningful developmental value,
- and leaves schools weakened, not strengthened.

Overwhelmingly, Ofsted was found not to be a developmental inspection, but as an experience of institutional harm.



FINDINGS

The dominant finding across all the data sets is that Ofsted is harmful. Seven themes connected with the human impact of Ofsted emerged in our interpretation of the evidence:

1. Emotional harm and trauma

Participants describe:

- exhaustion,
- tears in meetings,
- hospital beds,
- burnout,
- collapsed confidence,
- family strain,
- anxiety,
- depression,
- hyper-vigilance,
- fear of the next cycle.

Participant quotes:

- “It just burns you out.”
- “Completely broken.”
- “Mine is sinking... paddling underneath.”
- “Cannot say no – just play the game.”
- “Uploaded my CV to leave.”

Several participants described life-changing impacts, including leaving the profession entirely, or taking lower-paid roles with less pressure.

2. Professional identity collapse

In all datasets, teachers and support staff construct a powerful contrast:

The “ideal teacher”

- trusted,
- respected,
- rested,
- resourced,
- child-centred,
- collaborative,
- confident.

The teacher after Ofsted:

- fragmented,
- deflated,
- small,
- doubting self,
- stripped of autonomy,
- creativity erased,
- “arms and eyes removed”,
- crushed even by a “good” rating.

These effects are not tied to inspection grade outcomes, indicating that it is the process itself that causes the harm. As one participant put it: *“Even if it’s Good or Outstanding, you’re still crushed.”*

3. Silencing and erasure

A recurring pattern is the active suppression of teacher voice, where inspectors were: putting up their hands to stop teachers speaking, refusing to hear contextual explanations, ignoring expertise in EYFS, not giving feedback after hours of evidence preparation, holding multiple meetings ending in tears, and giving feedback only about leadership, not teaching.

Data revealed dehumanisation of the inspection process (*“The Canadian geese swooped in... I hoped they would be human but they are not.”*), including of the inspectors themselves (*“OFSTED is people, so how do they become that machine?”*)

The findings of this research indicate that the methodology of inspection is experienced as, a) adversarial, not facilitative, b) interrogation, not inquiry, and c) performance, not partnership.

4. Systemic Injustice

There is a strong sense within the data of systemic injustice, including shifting goalposts and arbitrary demands made by inspectors of those working in schools

- irrelevant recommendations (e.g. £20k gazebo for shade),
- contradictory demands,
- inspectors making factual errors and refusing correction,
- reports described as containing “lies”,
- changes to cutlery, lunches, and routines without pedagogical rationale,
- EYFS judged by secondary inspectors using inappropriate criteria,
- removal of effective activities due to misunderstanding of intent.

Comparisons were made about how the Ofsted system works with health and safety systems, where it was claimed that issues found by H & S inspectors can be corrected before grading. Of the Ofsted approach, and

its impact on the professionals within the schooling system, one participant said, “It is cruel. We would not do this to children.”

The extent to which Ofsted inspectors understand the work of inclusion, early years, or complex classrooms was regularly questioned.

5. Performativity over learning

Participants describe a shift from: teaching to performing teaching.

The evidence cited of performativity being the emphasis during inspections included:

- scripting, rehearsing, polishing
- removing “challenging pupils” from the day,
- abandoning curriculum flow mid-topic,
- endless paperwork prepared “just in case”,
- nights spent awake altering lessons.

One participant summarised: “Not reflective of one day in the life of the school.”

6. Collateral impact

Evidence of the following structural events recurs, impacting on SEND pupils, the families of staff and children attending schools, is found within the database:

- support systems suspended during inspection,
- ECT mentoring removed,
- SEND children relocated to ensure the school “appears calm”,
- parents used as unbalanced evidence,
- childcare challenges at homes of teachers,
- emotional labour offloaded to the teacher’s family.

Participants describe how their own families, at the time of inspections, become unpaid emergency services in being involved in coping with the crisis induced by the inspection event. As one participant said, *“My family heard we had the call and they stepped up.”*

They also interpret that during the course of an inspection children become data points, not learners. As a participant stated about the inspection process itself: *“No one has children at the centre.”*

7. MAT structure and accountability asymmetry

When inspecting a school within a MAT, the data reveals an issue within Ofsted that concerned a number of participants with one participant talking of: “Ofsted inspects one pond, but teachers work across multiple ponds”. Another talked about how MAT strategy shapes teacher action, but Ofsted does not examine the MAT. Indeed, a reference was made to a LEGO construction in saying, *“No duck is an island.”*

There appears to be a major structural issue in how accountability is applied to schools, in that recurrent participants explained that inspection findings of their particular school were caused by system-level decisions. There is a feeling of injustice that the school and its teachers carry the weight of decisions they did not make.

Metaphorical representations:

The following LEGO models built by participants as metaphors for their experience of the inspection system and what Ofsted means to them, included:

- Dinosaur – extinct, “trapped in amber”, dangerous, needs to evolve.
- Prison door – maximum security, lockdown, artifice.
- Bunker – war, siege, no life outside.
- Obstacle course – only those who “play the game” reach the top; others leave.
- Random bricks – no coherent logic.
- Precarious tower – climb, then “do I jump off?”
- Earthquake – organisational collapse.
- Canadian geese – swooping, honking, flying away.

Across all metaphors, there is a consistent message that Ofsted is unstable, hollow, frightening, and disconnected from children. The “trapped in amber” quote highlights how fossilised the actors have become. The participant did not specify whether they were the fossil or the inspectors were. It is significant, however, that no one described Ofsted as either developmental, fair, helpful, collaborative, or trusted. Not one.

Participants also articulated a clear, coherent and hopeful alternative model, centred on:

- collaboration,
- peer-led review,
- contextual understanding,
- trust,
- shared responsibility,
- relational support,
- and a focus on children, not metrics.

The metaphorical representations of a vision for an alternative system were remarkably identical across the sample of participants.

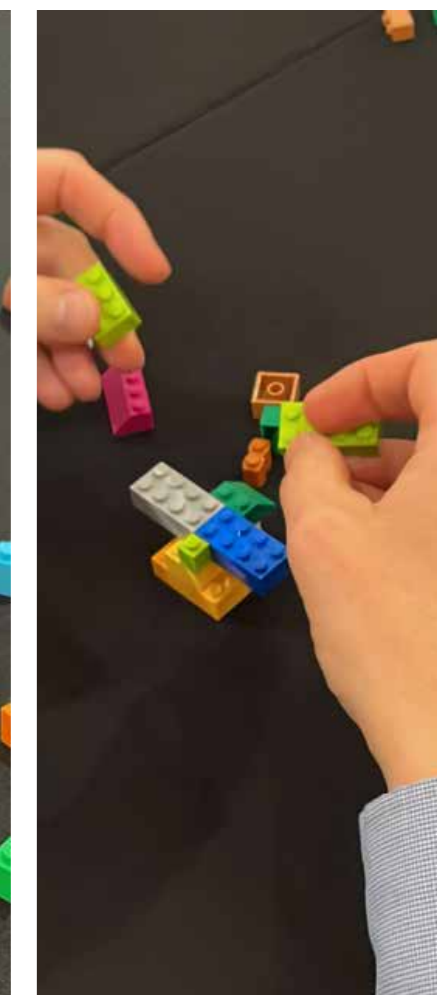
The models built included:

- boat with everyone on board,
- tree with organic growth,
- steps upward for all children,
- senior leaders around the edges, holding the community,
- one vehicle, many creative roles.

Participants produced a coherent, hopeful alternative vision in their models displaying consistency of principles, which can be captured as:

- open doors,
- peer review (not judgement),
- equality and equity,
- steps for everyone,
- SEN and disadvantage explicitly supported,
- senior staff holding and supporting,
- stable foundations,
- contextual creativity,
- collective responsibility,
- time to breathe (air bricks),
- shared practice,
- democratic inclusion,

- children at the centre.
- Opinions were expressed about lessening the use of grading in inspections and seeking to ‘lift’ rather than label. Parallels were drawn with thinking about pedagogy in schools where personalised feedback is intended to provide steps up to learners; as one participant said, “forget the number - look at the comments”. Others spoke of taking the trauma out of inspection and making it a learning process involving coaching, modelling and joint enquiry; “It’s about improvement as growth, not judgement as verdict”.



DISCUSSION

Research has illuminated the psychosocial impact of school inspections, including stress, reputational anxiety, performativity, and distortions to practice (Ball, 2003; Calvert et al, 2025). However, the meaning-making processes by which teachers internalise and respond to inspection pressures is less well researched; hence the use in this study of LEGO Serious Play® (LSP) as a method for eliciting embodied narratives of inspection. LSP externalises participant thinking through metaphorical construction, stimulating storytelling grounded in personal and collective experience (Gauntlett, 2007). Because Ofsted evokes complex emotions—including fear, pride, shame, defiance, and solidarity—LSP allows these tensions to be openly articulated without direct confrontation. This research, by this method, enabled participants to metaphorically represent themselves and their work during Ofsted inspection. They were asked to explore what emotional and relational dynamics are mobilised in the aftermath of an inspection and how they would symbolise Ofsted as a system. And finally, participants were invited to envision an ideal model of school improvement.

The impact of an inspection

The evidence reveals teachers feeling deflation, exhaustion, and self-doubt after an inspection, regardless of the grading outcome. The experience produces overwhelmingly negative emotional states, including feeling, “perplexed”, “broken”, “questioning whether to continue”, and “head on the line”. As one participant noted when explain her LEGO model of a duck:

“Before Ofsted she was okay and happy. Now she sees herself in a different light... questioning whether she continues in her job.”

The impact of inspection is to produce identity destabilisation where teachers who previously felt competent and valued described a sudden collapse in self-worth and public confidence, as evidenced in a metaphor, often repeated, where the sense was of professionals paddling beneath the surface:

“Absolutely knackered... paddling under water. Grateful family are covering the nest while I’m working.”

This spill over to the teacher’s family, their partners and children, is an important impact to register where loved ones of the workforce need to absorb the emotional and logistical labour of inspection. Reid (2018) found evidence in his research about the silencing of care as an impact of Ofsted and cites the example of a teacher how didn’t notice her daughter was becoming anorexic during the build up to an inspection because her focus was taken away from her family.

The sense of feeling about the futility of inspection is a strong theme, exacerbated by the experience of the goalposts shifting, as one teacher says, “I’ve had three inspections. Every time the goalposts change—it’s a mountain I’ll never get to the top of.” The demand made of the profession to internalise what they perceive as unattainable standards, becomes a state of work being experienced as *permanent inadequacy* rather than conditional improvement.

Erasure of professional dignity

In addition to the data illuminating a lack of listening on the part of inspectors, there is clear evidence of active suppression, through examples of inspectors raising a hand to stop teachers speaking, their ignoring teacher expertise in early years, their not using the names of staff in schools, withholding

feedback and rejecting data as proof. Unsurprisingly, this leads to participants expressing feelings of feeling belittled: “Expertise not listened to—demeaning. Had to put my hand up.”

The asymmetry in the power dynamic of the school professional and the inspectorate was felt bodily, with inspection being experienced as procedural humiliation, not dialogue. This violation of what teachers hold as ethical practice somewhat inevitably leads to a sense of moral injury and injustice within the survey sample. As one participant stated about giving the model of a flower to a colleague the day after an inspection, that they were, “Giving a flower to someone who has experienced a death.” Another described the unjust impact of inspection as “We would not do it to children. We would not do it in any other line of work”, contrasting inspection with how schools treat children:

A pernicious impact noted by several participants was the factual disagreement they experienced in what the inspectors recorded, with one saying, “Inspectors lied in the report and would not take their words back”. Such conduct produces a sense of systemic gaslighting where teachers are made to doubt their own perception of reality.

The harm inspection does

It appears dangerous to ignore the images presented in the LEGO workshops when they paint metaphorical perceptions of Ofsted including:

- bunker / war (“takes over your life like a war”)
- precarious tower (“do I or don’t I jump off?”)
- random bricks (“makes no sense anymore”)
- hollow core (“regimented shell around a cavernous hole”)
- dinosaur (“extinct... dangerous... trapped in amber”)
- prison door (“locked down... show what

- they want to see”)
- obstacle course (“fiendish... only a few play the game”)

These metaphors alongside describing Ofsted as, “A dangerous relic suspended in time”, builds a picture of an inspectorate that is archaic, hollow, violent, and indeed absurd. The inspection process is not experienced as a modern developmental instrument, but as institutionalised danger. It is something that causes harm. Inspection was not described as a discrete event, but as a cycle that accumulates harm: “Just relieved it’s over, but not looking forward to the next cycle”.

Evidence of repeated trauma surfaced in the survey data from such things as the teacher partner of a participant having a heart attack, examples of a participants’ headteachers being sent home in distress, exhaustion requiring hospitalisation, leaders crying in meetings, children with SEND losing support during inspection and teachers working on their CVs in order to leave profession. These exemplars surfacing from this sample of survey participants are too serious to ignore. The ripple effect of these experiences was explicit, and as one teacher stated about the inspection experience: “It impacts far beyond school. The ripple goes out to family. Even if it’s Good, you’re still crushed.”

It has to be of concern that the trauma of experiencing an inspection does not end with the judgement because professional identities are shaken, professional confidence eroded and career trajectories changed. Furthermore, teachers felt emotionally abandoned after an inspection, where one said of the inspection that it was a, “tsunami and then no emergency service”. The evidence that participants chose not to give their LEGO model flower to others, with one saying, “I would give it to myself. I survived”, demonstrates the self-gifting of flowers as a protective act. These teachers are attempting to reclaim self-worth and are indicating a need to endure without institutional care. Additionally, the evidence

of other teachers attempting collective repair by leaving their 'flowers' in staffrooms and seeking out traumatised peers illuminates support for colleagues that is mutual aid, not organisational support.

Recruitment and retention are problematic in the teaching profession in England; thus, to not take concerned note of the evidence above seems foolhardy of policy makers.

A potential alternative

The survey participants provided a coherent vision for inspection that was relational, contextual, and humane. The metaphors presented communicated key principles for a future school improvement system, which included:

1. Collaboration over surveillance
2. Contextual diversity ("what works for my school may not work for yours")
3. Child-centred practice
4. Time and trust
5. Steps toward growth, not grades
6. Feedback as dialogue
7. No fear culture
8. Professionals as partners, not objects

As one participant summarised, the overall approach should be a process of formative evaluation, not summative judgement, saying, "Forget the number. Look at the comments. Here's the step just above you."

SUMMARY

The findings interpreted from the LEGO Serious Play contribute a significant affective insight into the lived experience of the English school accountability system. The metaphoric constructions made by participating teachers and support staff depict Ofsted not simply as stressful, but as structurally harmful, inflicting damage on their professional identity and confidence, impacting negatively on their own wellbeing and that of their families, being detrimental to children's in-school experience, and enabling toxic staff cultures to prevail in schools.

The metaphor of Canadian geese, cited by one participant, illustrates inspection as episodic, migratory, extractive, disruptive, and emotionally detached.

The hope on the part of teachers that inspectors would be "human", but instead describing them as robotic, machine-like, and procedurally cruel, is a serious indictment of what is happening in the English school system where inspection is experienced as a performance of improvement, not improvement itself. The pernicious impact of Ofsted is to block voice, encourage artifice, punish complexity, narrow the curriculum, diminish inclusion practices, and discourage creativity. In light of what the participants articulated, it is difficult not to conclude that the weight of Ofsted is harmful. This harm is not only emotional, but structural, pedagogical, and relational.

There was no evidence that any participant rejected accountability; they reject the form of accountability metered out by Ofsted.

Their preferred alternative is a system of accountability for school improvement that is:

- collaborative,
- humane,
- contextual,
- equitable,
- centred on children,
- and grounded in mutual trust rather than assumed deficiency.

In short, the profession does not lack a vision for improvement. It lacks the agency of a system that respects and enables that vision. Notwithstanding this predicament, teachers and their colleagues hold a deeply coherent view of what supports improvement; a view that is aligned with research on effective systems: partnership, coaching, peer observation, and collaborative inquiry (Woods & Roberts, 2018; Watkins & Silver, 2025)



PART THREE

Conclusion and Recommendations

CONCLUSIONS

The two sets of findings presented, after researching samples of two populations, surveyed using different research methods, have considerable resonance with each other. The school leaders interviewed expressed a significant threat from the inspection regime to their wellbeing and spoke of a lack of confidence in the capacity of Ofsted to hear and adapt to feedback. There exists an unhealthy relationship between the mechanism of school inspection in England and the professionals who are leading schools and school improvement. Those who lead schools do not have confidence in the system of inspection and, consequently, there is a dysfunctional dynamic between the inspectorate and the school sector; too many leaders identify a coercion within the dynamic for there not to be major concern about a potential toxicity prevailing in the school system in England. As Klein (2024, pages 336 & 337) discusses: in the propensity that we all have to care and uncare, the finding of this research is compelling in how the English inspectorate may contend that it cares for the young people but is uncaring in its disposition towards those who work in schools.

An interpretation of the opinions held by teachers and support staff, as collected in the Lego Serious Play workshops, triangulates with the findings of the school leaders' interviews, as they too experience anxiety when being inspected, and for too many the impact is traumatising. It cannot be healthy and right for workers in any walk-of-life to find the stress of being inspected such that it induces trauma. It is evident that teachers and leaders suffer PTSD following being inspected and many leave the profession as a result. This research illuminates a desire to have an audit and assessment of schools that informs professional learning and is constructive, rather than the overwhelming punitive impact that the current inspection regime

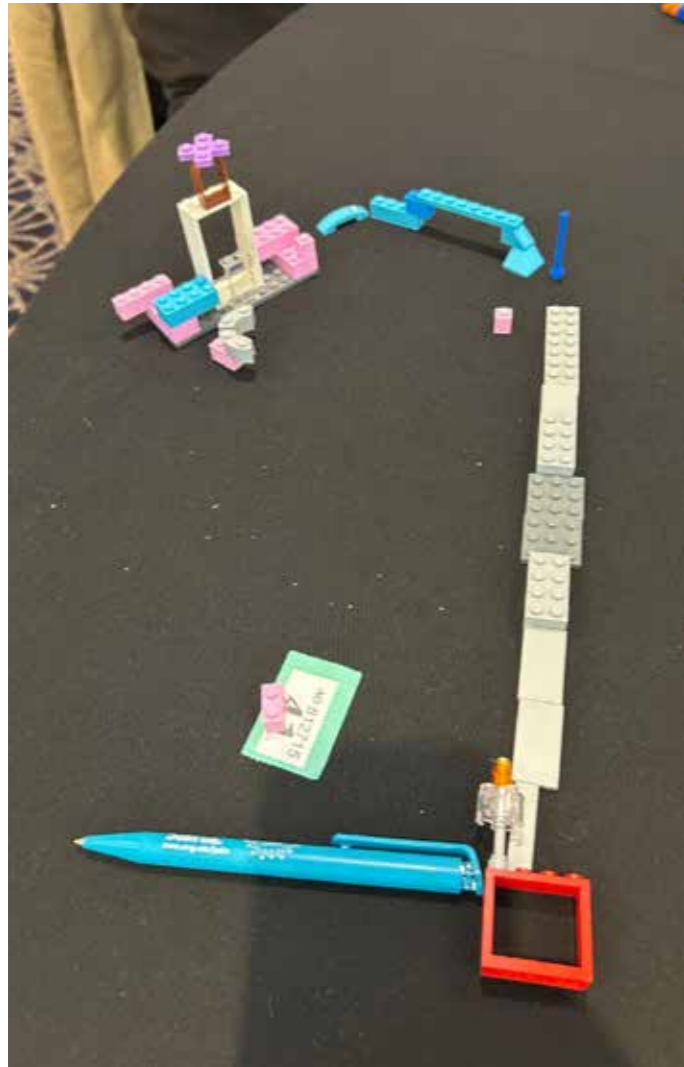
engenders. Harm is being inflicted, and this research team deduces that inspection in its current form is also harmful to children. [an interpretation further discussed in the appendix to this report.]

To not conclude that Ofsted is not fit-for-purpose would be to ignore the findings of this enquiry. The evidence is compelling that something existential must change in how the inspectorate operates in England. A recommendation emerging from this research is to suspend the activities of Ofsted and to spend the money on supporting schools to improve, instead of inflicting a tyranny of compliance. Inspectors need to be released from the systemic culture of harm that they may not realise they are giving agency to (although we contend that a good number know that they are perpetuating distress). Instead, a transformation in the nature of their work could be achieved, where inspection is no longer a key player in the marketisation of education in England and a force-for-good in motivating the profession to engage the youth of our country to school them in ways that really make a difference for their future lives. A paradigm shift towards advisory activity that grows our workers in schools and builds professional capital, increasing the talent density in schools, will be both rewarding for inspectors and for those being inspected. Doing this will curb the evident overreach by inspectors that is happening and address the pernicious and toxic power dynamic existing between the inspectorate and those working in schools who are the ones really adding value for young people within the English system. We believe such a transformation will cease the present situation where inspectors, school leaders and teachers are akin to frogs in water heating up to boiling point; the school sector in England has become normalised to accepting the damage being done to itself and the young people it serves.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The call to action that emerges from this research is to:

1. publicly challenge the damage caused by inspections and advocate restorative processes for affected schools, teachers and leaders
2. commission further enquiry that learns how to implement 'inspection support' for schools where expertise to contextualise understanding and appreciation is at the core of the process, within an endeavour that needs to
 - be collaborative, proportionate, and improvement (not proving) focused
 - prioritise staff wellbeing, pupil outcomes, and equity over market mechanisms
 - work with the unions, parents, governors and policymakers to co-create a fit-for-purpose alternative to the current Ofsted that is a credible, supportive and trusted accountability framework
 - consider the value of approaches such as coaching models
 - provide transparent and fair complaints processes



REFERENCES

- Ball, S. (2008). *The Education Debate*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Baxter, J. (2017). School inspectors, policy implementers, policy shapers: influences and activities. In: Baxter, Jacqueline ed. *School Inspectors: Policy Implementers, Policy Shapers in National Policy Contexts. Accountability and Educational Improvement*. London: Springer, pp. 259-275.
- Calvert, G., Perryman, J., Bradbury, A., & Kilian, K. (2025). Turning school inspections toxic: insights from an inquiry into Ofsted in England. *Journal of Education Policy*, 40(5), 785-806
- Chapman, C. & Earley, P. (2010) School Inspection/External School Evaluation In: International Encyclopedia of Education (3rd Ed) p 719-725
- Fortune, J & Peters, G (1995) *Learning from Failure the Systems Approach*. John Wiley & Sons. ISBN: 0471944203.
- Gauntlett, D. 2007. *Creative explorations: new approaches to identities and audiences*. London, UK Routledge
- Kerasidou, A., & Kingori, P. (2019) 'Austerity measures and the transforming role of A&E professionals in a weakening welfare system'. *PLoS ONE* 14(2): e0212314.
- Klein, N. (2025) *Doppelganger; A Trip into the Mirror World* Penguin Books
- Ozga, J. (2009) 'Governing Education through Data in England: From Regulation to Self-Evaluation', *Special Issue of Journal of Education Policy*, 24(2) 149-163
- Perryman, J; (2006) Panoptic performativity and school inspection regimes: Disciplinary mechanisms and life under special measures. *Journal of Education Policy*, 21 (2) pp. 147-161.
- Perryman, J. (2009) 'Inspection and the fabrication of professional and performative processes' *Journal of education policy* 24 (5), 611-631
- Perryman, J., Ball, S.J., Braun, A., & Maguire, M. (2017) Translating policy: Governmentality and the reflective teacher *Journal of Education Policy* 32 (6), 745-756
- Reid, J. (2018) *Primary Teachers, Inspection and the Silencing of the Ethic of Care*. Emerald Publishing
- Reid, J. (2024) *School Inspection: Unconscionable Acts of Reason* University of Huddersfield [film published on 19/6/2024]
- Watkins, A. & Silver, M. (2025) *Reinventing Education - Beyond the Knowledge Economy* Routledge
- Thompson, P. (2010) 'The capitalist labour process: concepts and connections'. *Capital and Class*, 34 (1) 7-14.
- Woods, P. & Roberts, A. (2018) *Collaborative School Leadership: A Critical Guide* SAGE

APPENDIX 1

The question protocol of the semi-structured interviews was as follows:

1. Describe your experience of Ofsted inspections.
2. What themes or issues have emerged following Ofsted inspection for; a) you personally, b) for colleagues, c) for the school?
3. How have schools responded to Ofsted inspections?
4. What are the correlations between inspection outcomes and the context in which schools are operating?
5. How does the experience of inspection for schools differ depending on the inspection result?
6. What factors underpin these differences in experience?

The structure and timings of these interviews were planned as follows:

- 5 mins for introductions and confirming right to withdraw etc.
- 5 minutes explaining the context for the research
- 40 mins for the conversation
- 5 mins for concluding the conversation and checks of understanding.
- 5 mins for thanking the interviewee and inviting them to share any follow up thoughts
- Reiteration of confidentiality and anonymity.

The facilitation of the first Lego Serious Play workshop consisted of the following series of activities:

1. Chose 7 bricks and with all of them - build a duck
2. Name your duck and, in turn, introduce them to the group as a duck who has just experienced an Ofsted inspection
3. Chose 7 more bricks and use them all to build onto the duck to create a flower
4. Imagine this is the day after an inspection and, in turn, give your reasons to the

group for whom you are giving the flower to as a gift

5. Return all the bricks and choose another 20
6. Use the 20 bricks to build an answer to the question: "What inspection means to me?"
7. Present your model to the group, explaining what it says
8. Re-work the model, using additional bricks if required, so that it represents: "My ideal approach to school improvement".
9. Present your latest model to the group

In the second workshop, the facilitation consisted of:

1. Chose 7 bricks and with all of them - build a duck
2. Name your duck and, in turn, introduce them to the group as a duck who has just experienced an Ofsted inspection
3. Chose 7 more bricks and use them all to build onto the duck to create a flower
4. Imagine this is the day after an inspection and, in turn, give your reasons to the group for whom you are giving the flower to as a gift
5. Return all the bricks and choose another 12
6. Use the 12 bricks to build a representation of what is the ideal teacher
7. Present your model to the group, explaining what it represents
8. Re-work the model, using additional bricks if required, so that it represents: "the impact on the ideal teacher of Ofsted"
9. Present this model to the group
10. Using whatever bricks you like, construct what an ideal school improvement system looks like and, in turn, share it with the group.

APPENDIX 2

The initial codes used to sort the data from the semi-structured interviews were collated into the five themes as follows:

Process & structural issues

Inspections blind to context
Systemic constraints / high stakes
Predetermined outcomes
Time constraints / rushed process
Inconsistent evidence validation
Secrecy & enforced silence
Sustainability / market ideology
Inspectors straying beyond remit
Draft reports / insensitivity
Safeguarding as weapon
Complaint process flawed
This meta theme is interpreting evidence that represents the impact of the 'machine', the system.

Credibility & capability of inspectors

Rogue / inconsistent inspectors
Lack of knowledge / expertise
Lack of credibility / lived experience

This clustering of evidence represents individual and teams, not the framework

Power dynamics & behaviour

Unpleasant conduct
Power dynamics
This theme and the data relates to how inspection is enacted as a relationship: control, intimidation, ego, dominance.

Impact on people & culture

Agenda to force academies (structural, but human fallout)
Induced trauma & long-term implications
Fear of black mark for CEOs
Sustainability / market ideology (overlaps –

human consequences)
Headteachers feel jobs on the line
This meta theme groups the data under an interpretive category about the human impact because the data illuminates burnout, stress, moral injury, sickness, identity collapse, career churn, self-worth, relational damage.

Forward thinking

Future reform / redesign
Positive wellbeing impact (small, but signals change)
This section captures data in which interviewees talked about the future and the evidence is interpreted as **solutions, alternatives, new models, hope, critique,** and positive glimpses.

Publication Information:

This publication presents the full findings of the National Education Union commissioned research into the impact of school inspection on educational professionals in England. Research conducted in partnership with Dr James Reid, Huddersfield Centre for Research in Education and Society, University of Huddersfield, with funding from Hampshire NEU and the University of Huddersfield.

Authors:

Julie Kelly
Sue Kent
Ian Potter

