

Press release

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Male school inspectors award more lenient grades than female inspectors

Male school inspectors are more likely to award higher Ofsted grades than female inspectors when inspecting similar primary schools, according to new research by the University of Southampton and UCL.

Released today as an academic working paper, the study explores the Ofsted grades awarded by 1,376 different inspectors across 35,751 school inspections conducted between 2012 and 2019. It is the first piece of independent research into how school inspection outcomes are linked to characteristics of the lead inspector, either in England or worldwide.

The study shows that male lead inspectors awarded a low grade ('Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate') to around a third (33.1%) of primary schools. By contrast, female lead inspectors awarded a low grade to 36.4% of primary schools.

This difference was particularly pronounced for the lowest inspection grade – 'Inadequate' – which can often result in headteachers of the inspected schools losing their jobs. Female lead inspectors were one third more likely to award an 'Inadequate' grade to primary schools than their male counterparts (5.9% versus 4.5% respectively).

To check whether this pattern reflects female inspectors being more likely to inspect low performing schools, the study also compared the inspection grades awarded to schools with the same prior Ofsted inspection rating, exam results, levels of pupil absences, pupil intake, and in the same region of the country. The study reveals that, even when comparing primary schools that are similar on all these characteristics, female inspectors remain more likely to award a low Ofsted grade.

There were no clear differences in the grades awarded by male and female inspectors inspecting secondary schools.

Study co-author Dr. Sam Sims (UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities) said: "Given the high-stakes nature of school inspections for parents and teachers, with many parents using these school inspection grades to help choose a school for their children, one would hope that Ofsted grades accurately reflected the quality of schooling on offer. But our new research shows that characteristics of the lead inspector can influence the Ofsted grade awarded to a school – and it appears that even similar schools receive different grades based on something as arbitrary as the gender of the lead inspector."

As well as gender differences, the study also found that freelance inspectors (Ofsted Inspectors) were more likely to award a higher Ofsted grade than inspectors employed on a permanent contract (His Majesty's Inspectors).

In total, 32% of primary schools inspected by a freelance inspector received a low grade compared to 44% of primary schools inspected by those holding a permanent contract with Ofsted. However, the authors note that those inspectors who hold a permanent contract with

Ofsted are also more likely to be assigned to inspect lower performing schools, which can explain some – although seemingly not all – of this difference.

The study found no differences in the inspection grades awarded by inspectors with more or less experience, working inside or outside of home region, or when inspecting schools within their primary/secondary school specialism.

Study co-author Professor Christian Bokhove (University of Southampton) added: “Many important decisions – driving tests, judicial sentencing, penalties in football matches - rely on human judgement. This inevitably leads to some inconsistency in the decisions made, with different individuals interpreting the evidence in different ways. As school inspections also involve on human judgement, it is no surprise that their outcomes also depend in part on the characteristics of the inspector(s) assigned.”

The researchers note that a new inspection framework was introduced by Ofsted in September 2019, which puts less emphasis on performance in national examinations and more on the quality of the curriculum. Since inspections were suspended during the pandemic, this analysis was based on inspections prior to the most recent framework change.

Commenting on the findings, Ruth Maisey (Programme Head for Education at the Nuffield Foundation) said: “The new inspection framework is arguably more subjective than its predecessor, placing more emphasis on how the curriculum is taught, rather than data. As a result, we might expect differences between inspectors to be greater. We would like to see Ofsted reflecting on these findings and seeking ways to improve the consistency of inspections.”

On the basis of the findings, the authors make two recommendations for Ofsted.

First, Ofsted should publish details about how inspectors are deployed to different inspections. This is important because, if different inspectors award slightly different grades, we need to know which types of schools are likely to be disadvantaged by this.

Second, Ofsted should deposit in the Office for National Statistics Secure Research Service an inspection-inspector linked dataset, facilitating further independent research into school inspections.

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Notes to editors

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Christian Bokhove, John Jerrim, and Sam Sims (2023) *Are some school inspectors more lenient than others?* will be published at <https://is.gd/nuffieldofsted> and <https://doi.org/10.5258/SOTON/P1108> on February 2nd 2023 and is under a strict embargo until this time.

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