

Book Reviews

Public Services Inspection in the UK

Davis, H. & Martin, S. (eds.)

London: Jessica Kingsley, 2008, pp.160,
ISBN: 978 1 84310 5275, £18.99 (pbk.)

Are public service inspections having any impact? Should there be a greater inspection emphasis on the outcomes of services? Do the public believe what inspectorates say? These are some of the questions raised in this provocative and self-critical publication on public service inspection. The editors are Steve Martin, Professor of Public Policy and Management at Cardiff University and Howard Davis, Research Manager at the Local Government Centre, Warwick Business School.

There are nine chapters. The first gives the history of public service inspection along with definitions and theories of inspection drawing on the wider regulation literature. This sets the scene for the next five chapters which examine respectively the inspection of local government, adult and children's care, education and skills, health services, and the inspection of criminal justice agencies. The chapters have a common structure intended to analyse the evolution of inspection in each sector, the current arrangements, the impacts of inspection, and the direct and indirect costs. The final three chapters take a wider view. Chapter Seven (Bundred and Grace) looks to a more holistic form of public service regulation. Holistic, they argue, in anticipating a common set of principles and methods shared between inspectorates. Clarke, in contrast, explores the paradoxes in the 'evaluation' of public services, doubting the claimed political independence of the inspectorates. The final chapter attempts to bring together this wide-ranging and sometimes contradictory collection of viewpoints on inspection. A valuable feature of the book is that it has a truly UK-wide scope, the devolved systems of inspection

are described for all four jurisdictions and there are active comparisons between the evolving systems.

Since the book was published, events such as the crisis in the banking sector (which arguably might now be termed a public service) and the failure of safeguarding in a local authority children's service have reinforced the importance of its central issues.

The first of these is the concern over inspection methodology. Bundred and Grace describe the problem as between collecting data on "managerial characteristics rather than ... reflecting improvements in service outcomes or in user satisfaction". These two approaches to inspection data can be termed as *process-driven* (is the process there?) or *outcome-driven* (what are the outcomes of this service or organisation?). Ideally, one would want a mix. However, what Bundred and Grace appear to be saying is that process-driven assessment has tended to dominate; that is, checking a process is present has been of greater significance than checking if the right outcome has been delivered.

Each contributor to the volume concedes that "evaluating the impact of inspection is extremely difficult" (p.140). Evaluation of inspection and regulation is difficult. Regulation is often about risk control and prevention and, as Sparrow points out (2008), if you prevent something happening, to the extent that there is no sign that it happened, it is then difficult to be sure if it is your intervention and not another that is the cause.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of measuring the impact of inspection and the doubts over the methodologies used, the conclusion of the authors is that it has led to improvement. The 'improvement focus' of inspection was

formally introduced through *Inspecting for Improvement* (Office of Public Services Reform, 2003) which explains the purpose of inspection as being to seek continual improvement in the performance of services rather than simply to establish 'compliance' with the regulations or standards. Evidence of improvement is shown through the increasing number of local authorities achieving better grades and ratings.

A recurring question, or possibly anxiety, in the book is the extent to which those inspected might be reproducing what they deduce inspectors are looking for, playing a game to ensure all parties are winners. The chapter by Downe (p.30) reports on the findings of a survey of local government staff revealing their view that they have improved their management of inspection in order to get a more positive inspection report. This is, of course, what has been called in other places 'creative compliance' (McBarnet & Whelan, 1991) or, more recently by Braithwaite, 'ritualistic compliance' (Braithwaite *et al.*, 2007). That some inspectees may be 'amoral calculators' should not come as a surprise (Kagan & Scholtz, 1984).

In dealing forthrightly with the issues of inspection, this is a valuable collection of writings that develops a critical awareness and overview. The contribution from Clarke creates a broader analytical view of inspection that fits well within the frameworks of regulatory and political scholarship. For those wanting to understand more of the origins, theories and practice of inspection, this book is a good place to start.

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Research Skills for Social Work

Whittaker, A.

Exeter: Learning Matters, 2009, pp.137, ISBN 978 84445 179 1, £16.99 (pbk.)

Research Skills for Social Work is a welcome addition to the growing body of work which makes information about doing research directly available and relevant to social work students and practitioners. It is aimed at final year students to support them in the requirement for small-scale original research that is often associated with projects and dissertations. It is full of examples of research carried out by and for social workers which by their inclusion, makes the application of research to practice relevant and real. One of the most valuable aspects of the book is the analogy made between social work practice and the research process.

The structure of the book is accessible with clearly set out headings and subheadings. The eight chapters cover the stages of the process of doing research for a final level dissertation. The first chapter outlines the skills and knowledge necessary to plan effectively for a dissertation. The important distinction between qualitative and quantitative approaches is explored early on and illustrated with case studies from the perspective of a student who is considering how to explore a research question. Examples of research that are directly relevant to social work are included with discussions of research methods and findings.

Chapter Two addresses the literature review which is an essential skill in and of itself whether or not it leads to original research. This chapter will be helpful where students are asked to evaluate existing research rather than carry out original research. Chapters Three to Six introduce students to the four most popular research methods used by social workers: interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and documentary analysis. Direct, practical advice is given

throughout in straightforward language. Balanced discussions are provided regarding the practicalities, advantages and disadvantages of each method. Students will find Chapter Eight on writing up the dissertation very useful. Some of the suggestions are relevant to issues that commonly arise for students in the broader process of writing and are thus applicable beyond the dissertation. It would have been helpful to say at the beginning of the book that the terms 'dissertation', 'project' and 'study' are used interchangeably, rather than explaining this in the introduction to the final chapter, but it will be clear to the reader that the book is intended to be a comprehensive guide to undertaking the research component usually required in the final year of a social work degree - whatever it is called. A glossary is included which explains research terms in user-friendly language.

The place of research in social work practice could have been discussed in more depth, i.e. beyond the presentation of QAA standards, but this was probably beyond the scope of this book. However, the book makes it clear that, as professionals, social workers have a responsibility to engage in the debates about research and reflect on research findings that inform practice.

Research Skills for Social Work will be a must on any research module designed for social work students. Ideally, students should be advised to read it the summer before their final year so they can begin thinking about their dissertation before the pressures of the final year take hold. It will also be an essential introduction to research for any social worker wanting to know the basic elements of the research process and could be useful in encouraging practitioner research.

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Quality Matters in Children's Services: Messages from Research

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London: Jessica Kingsley, 2009, pp.159, ISBN: 978 1 84310 9266, £19.99 (pbk.)

This book is the latest in the *Messages from Research* series, all of which have brought together key findings from national research studies with the aim of making research evidence both accessible and relevant to children's social care practitioners and managers. It offers an overview of key messages from nine research studies conducted between 2001 and 2007 that were commissioned to examine the impact of the *Quality Protects* programme. This was a five year government initiative launched in 1998, which had an overall aim of improving outcomes for children and young people in need, and particularly looked after children.

The book initially provides contextual information about the *Quality Protects* and the subsequent research programme. It then goes on to describe policy and legislative developments which usefully relate the research findings to the current social care environment. The main content of the book presents the key findings from the research programme and is structured in a way that reflects objectives of the *Quality Protects* programme. The content and findings from the individual studies are presented in separate chapters that, put together, cover the following themes: ensuring stability; safeguarding children; improving life chances of looked after children; and user involvement. All of the chapters on the individual studies briefly examine key issues from the literature, recent policy developments, the main findings from the study, implications for policy and practice and integrated working. They end with a 'Questions for Children's Services' section, designed to promote reflection and thought about issues raised by the studies and their possible relevance for improving outcomes at strategic, operational and practice levels

in organisations. The final chapter discusses the findings and ideas that cut across the studies and that have wider implications for the development of quality services. This is also related to the *Every Child Matters* agenda. A brief summary of each of the research projects is contained in Appendix One.

The author clearly acknowledges the changes in children's social work and children's services since *Quality Protects* and the commencement of the research programme. He presents and explores the findings in relation to the current context. As such, the content, issues and questions raised in this publication have relevance not only for children's social care but also for practitioners, managers and commissioners across Children's Trusts.

As with previous publications in this series, I find the presentation of research evidence in this type of overview format to be really useful. It offers information in an easy to digest way alongside both analysis and discussion of key implications for practice. The incorporation of the 'Questions' sections encourages some real interaction with the text. It also offers a helpful tool for readers at different levels in organisations to consider how the quality of their service might improve to bring about better outcomes. What I particularly like about this publication is the fact that a real effort seems to have been made to link the research to the current children's services context. I also liked the fact that additional materials have been produced and made freely available, designed to help promote and support the implementation of the key messages into practice. These materials can be found on the *Every Child Matters* website: www.ecm.gov.uk/qualitymatters.

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