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**Self-Policing or Self-Improving?:
Analysing Peer Reviews Between
Schools in England Through the
Lens of Isomorphism**

**University of Cambridge
20.1.21**

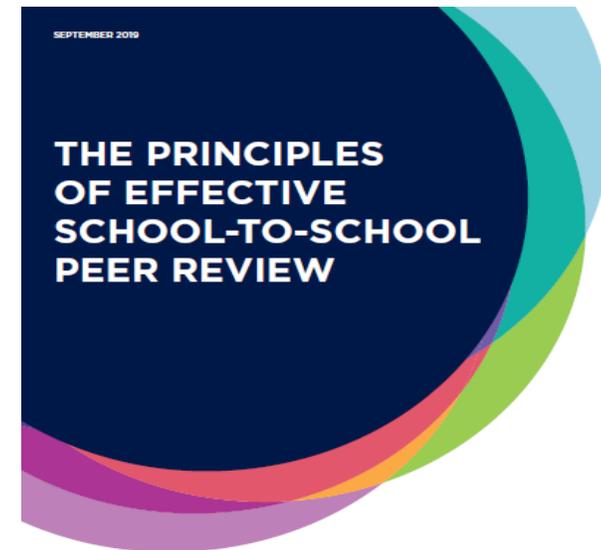
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“To become a fully self-led system, where teachers and school leaders are able to exercise their professional capabilities towards a common goal of improving the life chances of all young people, we believe peer review and collaborative working must be the norm, not an exception.”

NAHT, 2019

Nine principles for good school-to-school peer review

1. Committed to better outcomes for all
2. Action focused
3. Rigorous and objective
4. Structured and robust
5. Expert and evidence led
6. Done with, not to, the school
7. Open and trusted
8. Builds deeper relationships
9. Commitment to continuous improvement





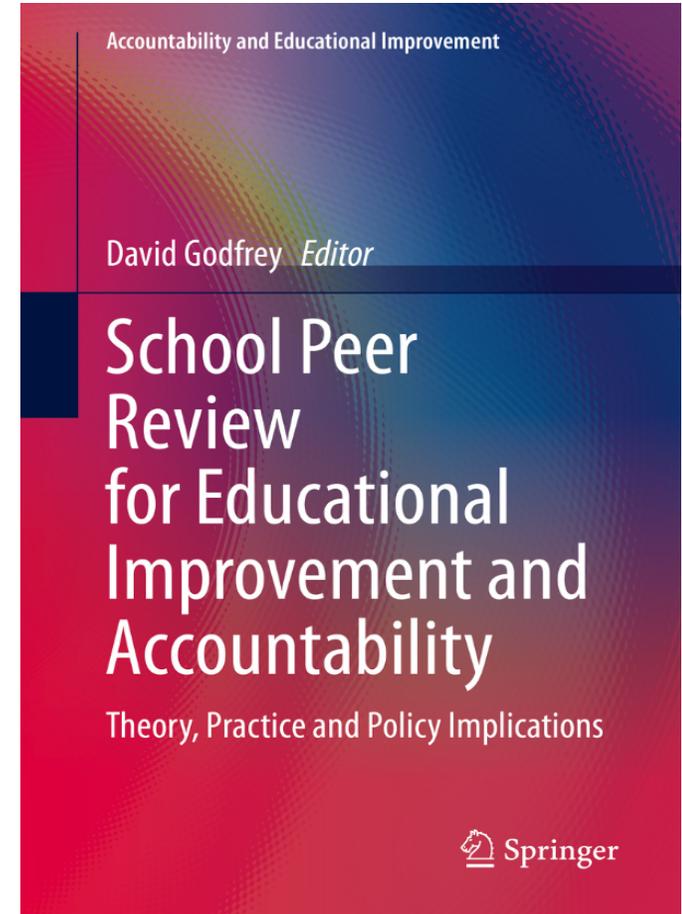
Defining peer reviews between schools

Involves staff from at least one other school in formally reviewing an aspect of practice within the host school and in feeding back their findings (Greany, 2020).

Differs from other forms of school evaluation, accountability and improvement, e.g:

- peer-to-peer coaching/observations by staff within a school
- internal/self-evaluation by schools
- (Ofsted/ISI/SIAMS) inspections
- reviews by school oversight bodies (eg Local Authorities, MATs).

Also differs from other forms of networking and collaboration between schools – e.g. via subject networks, school to school support.





Peer reviews – an evolving response to external inspections

Increase in school systems globally adopting ‘high-autonomy-high-accountability’ models as part of wider New Public Management reforms (Greany, 2015; Sahlberg, 2012).

School inspection bodies established in many systems to undertake periodic assessments of school quality and performance - more/less formative/summative approaches (Ehren, 2016).

Many inspectorates encourage/require internal/self evaluations by schools as part of inspection process (Shewbridge, 2013).

Studies highlight benefits from internal evaluation (eg ownership of change) as well as risks (eg performativity) (Nelson, Ehren, and Godfrey, 2015).

Peer review has emerged in various school systems in recent years – Czech Republic, England, Finland, Sweden, Belgium (OECD, 2013), Australia, Bulgaria, Chile, Wales (Godfrey, 2020) – seemingly in response to external inspection and building on internal/self reviews.



Peer reviews in England – a growing, mostly DIY, phenomenon?

Peer reviews remain voluntary for schools in England, but are increasingly common:

- Earley et al's (2012) Review of the Leadership Landscape - no mention of peer review
- Greany and Higham's (2018) survey found that nearly half (44%) of all schools had engaged in peer review in the previous year.

Various national and local organisations offer/sell frameworks and support for peer review: Challenge Partners, CUREE, the Education Development Trust (EDT), the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), UCL Institute of Education and Whole Education.

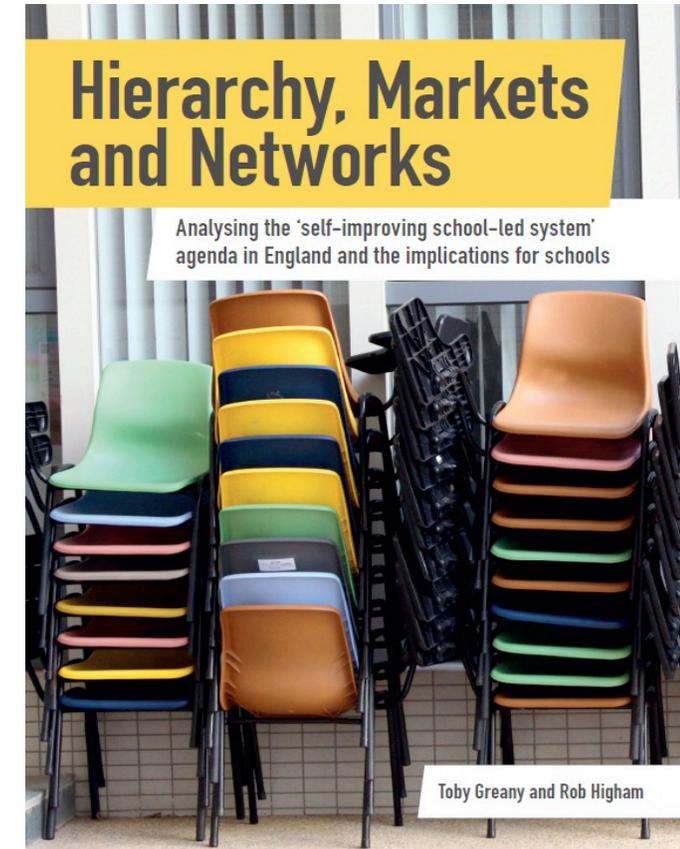
Around half of 47 case study schools visited by Greany and Higham had engaged in peer review, but only one is using one of these national/commercial models. Seems that many/most schools develop their own, Do-It-Yourself approaches.

Phase 1 Localities Research: 2015 - 2016

- 4 areas – high/low densities of academies & system leadership designations
- 47 primary & secondary school case studies - 164 interviews
- 18 system informant interviews

Phase 2 Quantitative strands: 2015 – 2017

- National survey of head teachers – c 700 responses
- Analysis of the impact of Multi-Academy Trusts
- Analysis of Ofsted results & student composition over 10 years





Hierarchy: peer review as normalisation and ‘self-policing’

Someone wrote about the panopticon, ‘that we are all self-policing now’ ... that we don’t have to have Ofsted every year, yet that is what [a national organization] is offering. ... It looks just like Ofsted. So, yes, it’s a sharing of data, but it’s only because you paid all the money for it; you have to. There’s a selectiveness about what data is shared; it’s shared in a transactional relationship: you give me a judgment that I can then use in my Ofsted report, when it comes around.

Principal, secondary convertor academy, Ofsted Outstanding



“Bureaucratization and other forms of organisational change occur as the result of processes that make organisations more similar without necessarily making them more efficient” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983:147).

Homogenisation is a result of institutional isomorphism - “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (ibid: 149).

Three mechanisms for isomorphic change (not always distinct and can/do co-exist):

- i) coercive isomorphism stems from political influence and the problem of legitimacy
- ii) mimetic isomorphism results from standard responses to uncertainty
- iii) normative isomorphism - associated with professionalization.



Coercive isomorphism (CI) - formal and informal pressures exerted on organisations. May be felt as force, as persuasion, or as invitations to join in 'collusion' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

England's accountability system a clear example – e.g. floor targets, inspection handbooks, rankings, powers of intervention (Ehren, 2019).

Vignette:

One case study secondary academy (converter) has formed peer review network with two non-local schools, one of which is officially designated as National Leader of Education (NLE).

Recent review by peer heads described by principal as 'hard-hitting' – the teachers are the cause of the school's 'problem' (i.e. the 'flat-lining' in exam results).

Resulting actions aim to create a 'no excuses' culture modelled on the NLE school – e.g. 'non-negotiables' for teaching, enhanced QA mechanisms and 'drop-in' lesson observations.

School's exam results decline further in two years following introduction of peer reviews.

Mimetic isomorphism – occurs where there is uncertainty, leading organisations to model themselves on similar organisations that they perceive to be more legitimate or successful.

Context for schools became more uncertain after 2010 – “we had to sort our own houses out really”.

Vignette:

I got four heads peer reviewing the school... I invited them in because they were people who were widely respected... I needed that – maybe this isn't the right choice of words – but maybe kind of that level of brutality and honesty.... They were all people with 2 or 3 schools, people with 500+ kids, people who've worked at national level on things like curriculum or whatever else.

Head teacher, Maintained Primary, Ofsted Inadequate

[The reviewed headteacher] by the end of it, feels like they've been absolutely beaten up. But probably by five o'clock that evening they'll have had ten, fifteen emails: 'Here's a teaching and learning plan you might want to look at', 'Here's something I've used', 'Come and look at this other school', 'Would you like some help on this?', 'I can broker this for you' - so it's a massive wave of support straight after.

Head teacher, Maintained Primary, Ofsted Inadequate

Normative isomorphism (NI) - stems from professionalization, as those working in a particular field establish professional standards, entry requirements and networks that set normative standards for how things should be done.

Vignette:

12 primaries in one town (and, historically, cluster): 6 heads are Ofsted-trained and designated as NLEs or Local Leaders of Education (LLEs), the other six are not. Historic divide between the two groups – e.g. Ofsted trained heads seen as “class traitors”. Introduction of peer review leads to a structural split - over time the 6 ‘Ofsted heads’ form their own Teaching School Alliance & MAT:

Literally, as soon as we mentioned doing inspections (i.e. peer reviews) in each other's schools, the room just divided in two, from “over my dead body” to those which were, “fine”... which was why SUCCESS [TSA] formed, because we wanted to move things at a higher pace than some of the other heads.



Conclusions

Self-improving or self-policing?

- “A self-accounting – even self-regulating school system” (Matthews and Ehren, 2017:50)
- Self-evaluation - “The teachers (or rather management) are (now the) inspectors, but without the power to make judgements. They are merely the warder, not the director of the prison with the power to liberate or punish” (Perryman, 2009:628).

Coercive isomorphism as key driver – mimetic and normative in ancillary roles.

Normative – complex picture that reflects personal as well as collective beliefs, values and histories, but some voices/views more dominant/powerful than others.

Caveats - peer review as “a space ‘outside’ the accountability system in which to be honest without fear of reprimand” (Greany and Higham, 2018:32).

Bananarama principle (“it ain’t what you do, it’s the way that you do it”) – brutal versus appreciative enquiry approaches, leadership only versus whole staff learning etc.

Further debates: consistency, quality, homogenisation and innovation.



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Thank you.

