

## Chapter 16

### The growth of school peer review, its characteristics and the way ahead

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#### Aims

The aims of the chapter are to:

- define peer review in education and other sectors
- set out how and why school peer review has grown in recent years
- outline emerging characteristics and patterns of use
- summarize the potential and challenges for peer review internationally.

#### Introduction

Peer review has long existed in many professions. The basis of peer review is the evaluation of work by people with similar skills or qualifications to self-regulate a professional practice. Although school peer review is a relatively new phenomenon, other professional sectors, including accounting, law, engineering, medicine and government policy makers have engaged in such practices for some time, in a variety of guises. Peer review practices in Higher Education (e.g. Harman, 1998) and Further Education<sup>1</sup> have also preceded the more recent growth in the school sector.

Examples of peer review activities across a range of sectors include:

- Scrutiny and evaluation of government policies by other country representatives, such as the European Commission's 'mutual learning programme'<sup>2</sup>
- Institutional quality assurance by teams of colleagues from equivalent services, for example, transnational vocational education peer reviews (Gutknecht-Gmeiner, 2013)
- Local area theme-based peer reviews involving multi-sector collaboration, e.g. around safeguarding children (Martin and Jeffes, 2011)
- Submission of scholarly work, e.g. a journal article, to double-blind review by other scholars deemed to be academically qualified to judge the quality and suitability of this work for publication.

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<sup>1</sup> One scheme in Hampshire colleges in England has been running since 1993:

<http://www.eqr.org.uk>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1047>

Peer review thus serves a number of purposes. It sets minimal standards of work in the profession/field and, in doing so, protects the status of the profession and reduces the risks of sanction (Edwards and Benjamin, 2009). Peer review also serves a gatekeeping function, determining the success or failure of research funding applications or the publication of academic works for instance. When peers evaluate the performance of professional practice, policies or initiatives, this can be done with a primarily summative or formative intention. For instance, a peer review can benchmark an organization against external evaluation, inspection or audit criteria (summative), or it can enable the sharing of ideas, learning and plans for improvement in order to advance 'client' outcomes (formative).

The process of peer review, particularly how it is applied to scholarly uses, has also undergone much scrutiny and criticism. For example, there are concerns that blind or anonymous review does not work because reviewers guess the identities of (particularly reputable) scholars. Furthermore, peer review judgements can be subject to confirmatory bias (e.g. Mahoney, 1977), can disfavour the work of minority groups and encourage nepotism (Wenneras and Wold, 2001), and can be unreliable (Cole et al., 1981). Such concerns mean that for peer review to be effective, it involves considerations of training, the use of process protocols, quality assurance, critical friendship and the strategic use of external expertise.

## **The growth of school peer review**

As mentioned in Chapter 4, peer evaluation has grown more slowly than other forms of external or self-evaluation by schools. An OECD review in 2013 nevertheless reported that peer review practices were emerging across several countries, including the Czech Republic, Finland, England, Sweden and provided a case study of peer review practices in Belgium. The Belgian case, published in an earlier OECD review (Shewbridge et al., 2011), found increased skills in critical friendship and in self-evaluation capacity among schools involved in collaborative peer review networks. An edited volume by the author (Godfrey, 2020), outlines further cases of school peer review practices in, inter alia, Australia, Bulgaria and Chile.

England has been a pioneering country in terms of school peer review. Gilbert notes that peer review is increasingly part of local area partnerships' change strategies and school improvement work (Gilbert, 2017). Large school improvement programmes with peer review at their heart have emerged, such as Challenge Partners (Berwick, 2020) and the Schools Partnership Programme (Ettinger et al., 2020). A 2018 study by Greany and Higham showed that nearly half of all schools had engaged in peer review in the previous year. In an ongoing independent evaluation of over 300 primary schools taking part in a trial of the Schools Partnership Programme (Anders et al., 2020), a third of the sample said that they had *already been involved* in a peer review programme in the two years prior to the trial. Most of these (59%) said that this was a model developed by themselves in partnership with

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other schools, while fourteen per cent were using a local authority model or one used in part of their formal school (Multi-Academy) Trust.

The emergence of school peer review has occurred in the context of many national system level variations, where multiple layers of school improvement and evaluation exist simultaneously. How these co-exist, compete, complement or antagonise becomes an interesting area of analysis. For instance, high stakes external accountability can have unintended effects on the operation of school self-evaluation and peer review. Peer reviews also exist – particularly in England – within other large school improvement networks and partnerships. Peer review forms an integral and powerful component in these but is allied with other processes within an overall school improvement focused theory of action, as discussed below. Finally, as many different models of peer review are devised, there is a need for a typology of models to distinguish quite different programmes. This was briefly noted in Chapter 4 and will be explored in more detail below. In particular, the contrast between the more external evaluation-oriented models and those that I have termed collaborative peer enquiry (Godfrey, forthcoming) is assessed.

## **Characteristic and patterns of school peer review**

### **Peer review as a supplement to accountability systems**

In Queensland, Australia, peer reviews have been encouraged as a supplement to the School Improvement Unit's (SIU) cyclical review model of external reviews (Diamond & Kowalkiewicz, 2020). The peer reviews are conducted by a SIU reviewer, a contracted reviewer and a school principal trained in peer review. Deputy principals, heads of department and other school staff can also be trained to conduct reviews. Reviewers make use of system data, such as standardised test results, report card results, school community satisfaction, attendance and behaviour data. They also undertake extensive fieldwork at the school, interviewing school leaders, staff, students, parents and community members. The peer reviewers also make reference to the school's own self-evaluation. Using the nine domains of the National School Improvement Tool (NSIT), the review team co-creates a review report and presents findings and improvement strategies to the school. Peer reviews are viewed as a mid-point health check, occurring sequentially, following the areas for improvement identified in the state-wide external reviews.

The Queensland model has characteristics that are similar to models of peer review in other countries. Eligible schools can voluntarily opt in and choose the specific focus of the review, informed by the NSIT and the school's most recent external review. The reviews employ a mixture of practitioner peers (school leaders) alongside an external critical friend/facilitator. The process is restricted to schools that show a solid improvement trajectory and excludes schools on a less firm footing, so can be seen to use an 'earned autonomy' approach, providing greater latitude to those who have already shown sustained signs of improvement. Diamond and Kowalkiewicz's (2020) research suggests that participating schools found it useful to have this mid-point review to provide interim feedback to schools still years away from their next external review. In addition, unlike external reviews, they could focus on the process of improvement, sharing ideas with

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colleagues in similar circumstances and also celebrate achievements and progress made in their school improvement initiatives. Those that participated in the reviews in Queensland also talked of their immense value as a form of professional learning, a sentiment echoed in other evaluations of peer review programmes (e.g. Matthews and Headon, 2015).

### Peer reviews - intended and unintended consequences

The Queensland approach illustrates a kind of parallel system of accountability that balances the professional voice of school leaders and the community with mandated, top down external system reviews. The appeal is that they give greater ownership over improvement and regulation in a maturing school system. The alignment in the framework used to conduct peer reviews makes intuitive sense in that the two accountability layers are meant to be complementary rather than antagonistic in their aims. Reviews conducted by peers also represent an innovative approach to school evaluation that, in theory at least, can encourage innovation and sharing of best practice to drive up standards from within the profession. However, the extent to which they achieve this remains a moot point and this is only beginning to be analysed empirically.

In one such analysis, Greany (2020) asks whether peer reviews offer a means for schools to take ownership of what is meant by 'quality', enabling innovative responses to contemporary challenges, or whether they serve to reinforce the external accountability system and quality metrics, making schools more homogenous. Greany analyses examples in the English school system through institutional theory, in particular the concept of isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The essence of this concept is that, through the force of rationality and bureaucracy, organizations can become more similar to each other without necessarily improving or becoming more efficient. Isomorphism occurs through political coercion, as a result of a reaction to uncertainty, or through the process of professionalisation (coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism respectively).

In Greany's case studies, all three types of isomorphism are evident. For instance, peer review can be seen to be initiated by school leaders in order to exert greater control and oversight over teachers, who are positioned as the problem in student under-achievement (coercive isomorphism). Secondly, high-status schools and school leaders often take centre stage in sharing their 'best practice' to others. In some circumstance, schools with insecure inspection judgements can feel under pressure to emulate the practices of the higher status peers (mimetic isomorphism). In this environment of 'system leadership', expertise that is more easily commodified and codified tends to dominate, thereby discouraging joint development efforts which arguably lead to more sustainable forms of buy-in and improvement. In the case of normative isomorphism, the pressures of external accountability lead to an internalisation by peer reviewers of the external accountability framework, which they then seek to impose during evaluation visits. This process, emulating Perryman's (2009) idea of panoptic inspection, is described as 'self-policing'.

In some ways, and as Greany argues, the above pressures can be seen as positive if they support the sharing and adoption of proven practices. However, by the same token, homogenisation might be seen as unhelpful if it prevents schools from innovating and adapting to pressing contemporary challenges, such as climate change or the need for

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young people to develop new skills and qualities in the context of globalisation and rapid technological change. For this reason, many have argued for ontologies of school systems characterised by their complexity, such as 'ecosystems' (e.g. Godfrey, 2019) in which teachers are 'knowledge workers' who collaborate to solve complex local problems, participate in decision-making and work within a profession that sets its own, evolving professional standards (Price & Weatherby, 2018).

### Peer review within school improvement partnerships

In England, peer review is often conducted within the context of membership of a school improvement network. These partnerships combine various elements in an overall theory of action with the intention of promoting sustainable school improvement. For school leaders wishing to embark on peer review, these have several advantages over the alternatives: they have large scale membership, providing access to many hundreds of schools including many in their local area; they have a training infrastructure, with many skilled facilitators that have experience in reviewing schools; they also provide further expertise and enable the dissemination of good practice and research. These partnerships enable school leaders to build on existing alliances with local schools, providing structure and focus to their endeavours.

To take the example of the Schools Partnership Programme (SPP), their methodology involves the enhancement of school self-evaluation, peer review and school to school support. These three aspects form a venn diagram of overlapping and complementary features in sustaining collaborative school improvement (Ettinger et al., 2020). The SPP theory of change works on three levels: firstly, to strengthen partnership working capacity and capability by growing a culture of shared responsibility and through the creation of open systems. Secondly, by strengthening leadership of collaborative school improvement to enhance trust within and across teams in the partner schools. Thirdly, the programme aims to increase teacher awareness and ownership of change, and to build alliances between teachers with similar responsibilities in their partner schools. The overall goal of the partnership is to improve student attainment and other specific outcomes; crucially these aims are self-developed by the school leaders involved in the programme. Partnerships are also usually self-chosen, i.e. the SPP does not dictate which schools work together. This is seen as important since, unsurprisingly, trust is an essential component in working collaboratively (Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

Further research is needed to understand how the different components of these partnerships' theories of change link to intermediate and final impact outcomes. The SPP is part of one of the largest evaluations conducted by the Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF) and which the author forms part of the independent evaluation (Anders et al., ongoing), so more light should be shed on this area when the report is published in 2022.

### Collaborative peer enquiry

This final section introduces a framework for analysing peer review models that draws on work by Christie and Alkin (2012), who use the metaphor of a tree to describe different

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branches of evaluation theory. For a more extensive comparison of models using this evaluation framework, see also Godfrey (2020b). Below the focus is on one branch, *valuing*, which compares how peer review models use different criteria upon which to make judgements and statements about what is valued and why (see Table 16.1 below).

**Table 16.1 Peer review programme ‘valuing’ typology**

	<u>Objectivist</u>	<u>Subjectivist/Constructivist</u>
<u>Quality Criteria</u>	Adopts external inspection criteria	Constructed by evaluators/stakeholders
<u>Standardisation/Breadth</u>	Broad and standardised	Specific, customized for each review focus
<u>Improvement/Validation orientation</u>	Summative grades	Formative levels or descriptive
<u>Locus of learning</u>	Host school receives feedback	Reciprocity/mutual learning

The above framework allows us to analyse and compare the various peer review models that exist, which can be objectivist or subjectivist in their underpinning philosophy. For example, we can differentiate: the degree to which quality criteria are constructed by evaluators and stakeholders; the extent of standardisation; the orientation towards improvement; and the locus of learning. Some approaches to peer review seek to align the schools’ efforts to the criteria used to judge schools in external evaluations, in England this would be by adopting Ofsted’s inspection framework. This contrasts with peer reviews that consciously create their own frameworks. These may seek to ‘go beyond’ the remit of an inspection or to focus in a way that is seen as less ‘judgemental’. Reviews can be broad and standardised, allowing comparison across the full range of reviews conducted, while others are tailored with criteria to match the focus of each review. Reviews can report grades, or they can be descriptive, for example by seeking to provide an assessment of school ‘maturity’ along defined dimensions. Finally, the focus of a review can be on how much the recipient (evaluand) learns from the exercise or can be set up a priori as a mutual or reciprocal learning experience.

Objectivist-focused peer reviews are more commonplace and are sometimes used to prepare schools for an external inspection, in a kind of rehearsal for the ‘real thing’ – sometimes referred to in England as a ‘mocksted’. However, subjectivist-oriented approaches are more focused on deepening and sharing learning about areas of practice and are less common in the peer review landscape.

One model that takes a subjectivist approach is called Research-Informed Peer Review (RiPR) (Godfrey and Spence-Thomas, 2020; Godfrey and Brown, 2019; Montecinos et al., 2020). Developed at UCL Institute of Education, RiPR exemplifies participatory

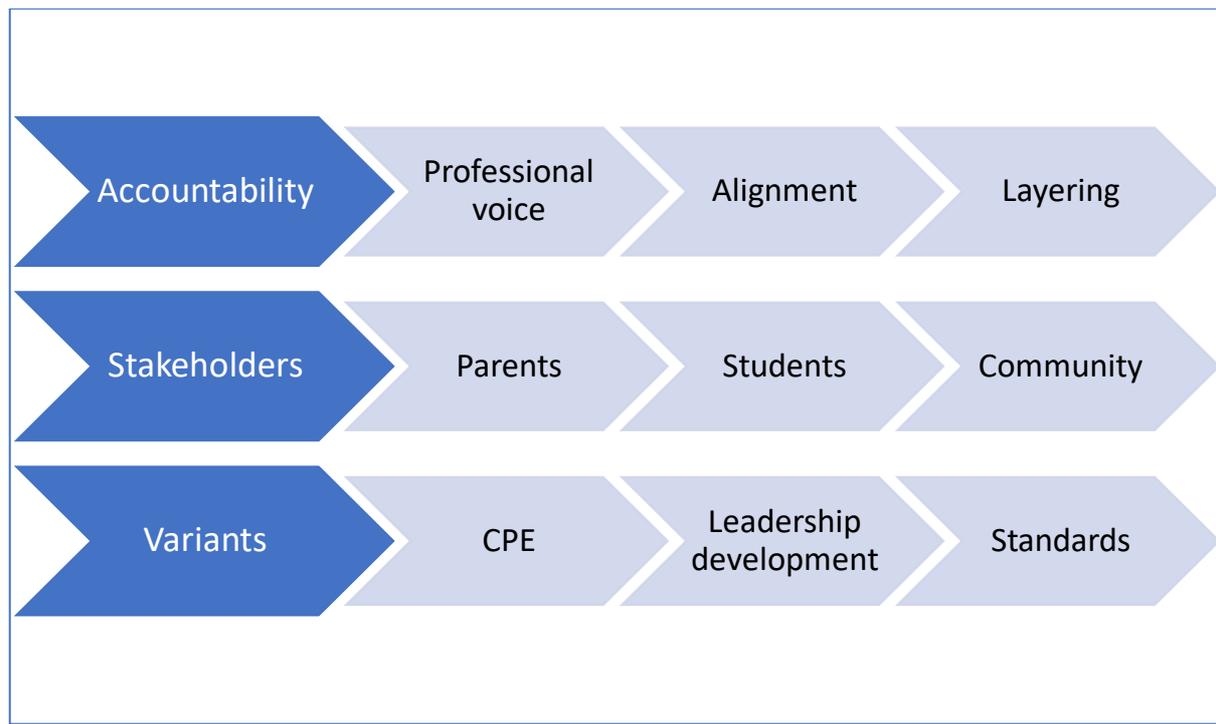
evaluation (Cousins and Earl, 1992) in its collaboration between researchers from UCL and school leaders and teachers. The explicit combination of practitioner and academic knowledge is characteristic of Collaborative Peer Enquiry (CPE) (Godfrey, forthcoming). In RiPR, schools work in clusters of three in mutual school visits and attend workshops conducted at the Institute of Education. Working on a shared enquiry theme (such as feedback and assessment policies and practices) small teams of three or four participants from each school develop practice through iterative cycles of review visitations and in joint workshops facilitated by UCL staff.

In RiPR, participants are taught to use the principles of theory-engaged evaluation, in which the purpose of reviews is to make practitioners' theories of action visible (Robinson and Timperley, 2013); policies are understood as espoused theories of action (the talk) and practices as theories-in-use (the walk) (Robinson, 2018). In one participant school, staff had worked together to develop and trial new assessment policies which made specific reference to the research evidence on effective feedback that they had read and showed an understanding of the gaps previously evident in their theory of action. CPE offers a quite different approach to peer learning compared to the above objectivist models and are akin to action research (Godfrey, 2020). Despite the deep learning professed by participants in CPE (Montecinos et al., 2020), further development will face the challenge of a resource and expertise-intensive process, in which appropriate academic expertise and critical friendship from universities may be needed, at least in the early stages of its use.

## Conclusion

So far, this chapter has looked at definitions of school review, how this practice has grown, and the emerging characteristics of its use. In conclusion, I draw out the potential and challenges for peer review in policy and practice. Figure 16.1 presents a visual summary of the accountability considerations, stakeholder aspects and variations in practice that may evolve.

### Figure 16.1 The way ahead for peer review



Peer evaluation provides professional, moral and lateral forms of accountability that contrast to the market and contractual accountability foci that dominate in external evaluation (Earley and Weindling, 2004). However, a challenge lies in how peer evaluations align with external evaluation systems. These additional 'layers' of accountability (Hadfield and Ainscow, 2020) can provide useful interim evaluations (Diamond and Kowalkiewicz, 2020) but can also create isomorphic forces that encourage self-policing and suppress innovation (Greany, 2020). The more open-ended forms of CPE may also explore aspects which challenge traditional authority on school quality, providing a more 'activist' stance by practitioners. A more inclusive view of peer review may also consider more proactive, structured involvement of other stakeholders in the process too, such as parents, students and other community members, including at district level governance and school support. Bringing in wider stakeholder involvement not only increases the democratic warrant for review recommendations but also helps to ensure buy-in and support to achieve the goals set out in the reviews.

In his well-cited work on 'signature pedagogy', Shulman (2005) shows how established professions have a form of learning about practice that is embodied in archetypal learning activities. For instance, law involves the study of cases and doctors learn through conducting rounds. Elsewhere I have argued that peer reviews have the surface, deep and implicit structures that Shulman describes as characteristic of a signature pedagogy: they involve demonstrating and sharing practice, assumptions about the most appropriate forms of knowledge, and make reference to the beliefs, values and moral underpinnings of practice (Godfrey, forthcoming). While leadership development is often cited as a key strength of the peer review process, this is rarely built in as an explicit goal and emerges rather as a 'by-product'. Therefore, more research is warranted on the ways in which leaders are selected, trained and developed through peer review experience.

Although the growth of peer review has involved much voluntary buy-in from schools (in the countries where this has happened) it has also been accompanied by a top-down infrastructure of support, including training and facilitation. This has been evident in England, Wales and Australia (see Godfrey, , 2020). However, in these countries, there has been extensive, established practice of external evaluation and inspection and school self-evaluation. In contexts where one or both of these aspects has not been thoroughly embedded, introducing and sustaining peer review practice remains a challenge. In the case of Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, both have been involved in projects with time-limited European research funding to promote peer review practice. However, evaluations of these experiences (Rossi and Parvanova, 2020; Michek et al., 2020), prove that in national contexts where self-evaluation is seen at best as a bureaucratic process by many schools, and where evaluation literacy among school leaders is lacking, peer review is difficult to grow and sustain. The 'schools inquiring and learning with peers' (SILP) model in Chile, also provides an interesting test case for how CPE can be used in a country newly-embarking on networked school improvement without a strong history of school collaborative practices (Montecinos et al., 2020).

In England, the National Association of Head Teachers' accountability commission (NAHT, 2018) also warns about the dangers of unfettered growth in this area, reflecting concerns by members of varying quality. It recommended further evaluation of existing peer review programmes to identify characteristics of effective practice and to develop national accreditation arrangements:

*The English education system is on a journey; too few schools currently engage in peer review, and not enough is yet known about the essential characteristics of effective review and the conditions in which it has an impact (p.19).*

Having professional standards of peer review is a sensible suggestion as long as these evolve in response to the research base. These standards can help to ensure that this time-intensive collaborative activity has clear potential to initiate and sustain meaningful and values-driven innovation and change, with inclusive membership and a focus on learning and development.

## Summary

This chapter has defined school peer review and outlined its use and purpose in other sectors. The growth of peer review in recent years and emerging characteristics and patterns of use were also described. In particular, peer review is seen as a supplement to traditional forms of centralised school accountability and also working dynamically alongside this external evaluation environment. High stakes accountability is seen to have a potentially pervasive effect on peer review, pressurising participants into self-policing and encouraging isomorphism. The chapter then outlined a conceptual framework to analyse the various objectivist or constructivist frameworks that peer reviews use in their evaluation judgements. In relation to this framework, a less commonly observed constructivist model of peer review, collaborative peer enquiry (CPE) is described, in particular Research-

informed Peer Review (RiPR). The chapter concludes by summarising the potential ways that peer review could be used in practice and policy and how it should be further researched. The power of peer reviews to balance accountability pressures on schools and staff is described. Potential for more explicit development of leaders, expansion of stakeholders and the use of more innovative models of CPE is also proposed. Finally, the chapter outlined barriers to the development of peer review, including immature centralised accountability and the lack of a culture of school self-evaluation or collaborative practice in some national contexts.

## Further reading

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