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OFSTED Special

OFSTED – misery and failure

The suicide of Ruth Perry seems finally to have breached the dam holding back the pent-up anger that OFSTED has generated within the teaching profession since its introduction by Kenneth Clarke in 1992. At the Easter Conference of the NAS/UWT a delegate went so far as to accuse OFSTED of “murder” and it has become the settled view of all the teacher unions that, at the very least, OFSTED requires drastic reform. Since 1998 there have been ten deaths within the teaching profession following an OFSTED report. Four of these have been suicides, with the other six being caused by conditions such as heart disease having been aggravated by stress. The inquest into Ruth Perry's death has been opened and adjourned. In all nine of the other deaths the coroner found that stress caused by an OFSTED report had been a factor.

It is difficult to say why the nine previous deaths did not arouse and focus the anger that has followed the tenth. It may be a case of Perry's death having been “the last straw” or it may be that the blatant mismatch between the OFSTED report of Caversham Primary School and the lived experience of the parents, children and staff has finally spotlighted not just OFSTED's propensity for creating distress but the sheer perversity of its judgements. By all accounts, Caversham Primary was the very opposite of “inadequate”: it was regarded by parents, children and staff as a quite outstanding school (in the proper sense of the term) and much of the credit for this was due to the leadership of Ruth Perry, who had been in post for 13 years. A Caversham parent, writing in *The Guardian* in March, said,

What most parents want to know is this: that teachers truly care about their children and their school, that they are talented and dedicated to giving a high standard of education, that they are committed to helping children become responsible, happy members of society with bright, unlimited futures. Caversham primary had all of these things in Ruth Perry.

The judgement of “inadequate” seems to have been based upon “serious concerns” about safeguarding, which, in OFSTED's inflexible system of box-ticking, leads automatically to a judgement of “inadequate”. These “concerns” were not themselves based upon any evidence of pupils having not been adequately safeguarded during the previous 13 years but upon “poor record keeping,” together with two extremely strange interpretations of observed pupil behaviour. In one case, a child's impromptu performance of a dance from a popular video game was construed as “evidence of premature sexualisation”; in another, a playground fight was interpreted as evidence of “child-on-child abuse”. In its written judgement OFSTED said that “poor record keeping” meant that the “school leaders” (i.e. Ruth Perry) “did not have the required knowledge to keep children safe from harm”. Clearly, OFSTED believes that, compared with paperwork, a life time of successful experience counts for nothing. This is not to decry the need for proper record keeping but the overwhelming consensus of teachers is that the need to create paper trails for the benefit of inspectors takes up a disproportionate amount of time that would be better used for the benefit of children. This need is widely seen as a major cause of the overwork that drives 30% of young teachers out of the profession within five years of starting.

Added to its demand for unconscionable amounts of paperwork is OFSTED's confrontational and inflexible approach to the task. Anecdotally, individual inspectors vary in their approach from the polite and helpful to



the downright rude but the system itself has always been set up to be hostile and to create the climate of fear of which so many schools complain. OFSTED was introduced to strengthen the policy of marketising state schooling, which the governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major had come to see as the chief means of bringing about “school improvement”. The idea was that “failing schools” would have to “raise their game” in order to survive as parents would not choose to send to children to such schools. Overwhelmingly, “failing schools” were those serving the children of the poor but to recognise the enormous difficulty of educating children living in an insecure environment was seen as “making excuses for failure”. Sympathy and constructive advice were therefore officially disapproved of from the start.

Since Ruth Perry's suicide became widely known, the DfE and OFSTED have wept a bucket of crocodile tears. The DfE's conventional response is typical: "We offer our deep condolences to the family and friends of Ruth Perry following her tragic death and are continuing to provide support to Caversham Primary School at this difficult time." Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman issued a similar statement but added that to discontinue inspections would not be “in the best interests of children”. How the systematic demoralising of their teachers is in the interests of children is difficult to discern but Spielman's acquaintance with the classroom is somewhat limited (hardly any since her own school days). Indeed, the Education Select Committee attempted to block her appointment in 2016, on the grounds that she lacked relevant experience, but was overruled by the then Secretary of State, Nicky Morgan.

Spielman's assertion that children benefit from OFSTED inspections would seem less preposterous if it were accompanied by any actual evidence of the good that OFSTED does but there does not seem to be any. In 2017 this was made clear by the National Audit Office, who stated that OFSTED “does not know” if its work leads to school improvement. Neither OFSTED itself nor the DfE has ever produced any hard evidence to contradict the NAO's judgement. OFSTED's current logo is RAISING STANDARDS – IMPROVING LIVES. To the great majority of those who observe its activities, it appears to do neither.

SCHOOL INSPECTION one teacher's story:

Not so long ago, I loved teaching. I was living in Australia, inspiring children's fascination with the world around them and stretching my own creativity. When I married my British husband, I moved to the UK. Now we're desperately waiting for his visa to come through so I can get back home to normal teaching. I knew moving abroad wasn't going to be easy, but I didn't expect to find the British education system so exhausting and pressurised. Since we moved here, every hour has been spent marking, stressing about data and planning lessons. I don't blame students or even other staff members for this. The responsibility lies at the door of one group: Ofsted. There's no equivalent to Ofsted in Australia: just like any other profession, experienced teachers are trusted to get on with their jobs. But here, in my “special measures” school, I'm constantly being checked, probed and poked.

When I first arrived I was taken aback by how much the leadership team in my school feared the inspectorate – and how much they put teachers under ridiculous scrutiny to please them. A member of management would come into my class, look around, frown and ask students demanding questions. “What are you doing in this lesson? Do you know what your targets are? How are you progressing?” Books would be brought out to make sure they were good enough and management would whisper in doorways, penning notes on everything from how I wrote on the whiteboard to how I dealt with distracted children.

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A week later the inevitable feedback would arrive. It was never anything constructive, like handy advice on websites or resources I could use to make my lessons more interesting. But rather they picked up on things that Ofsted might criticise, such as the fact that I hadn't drawn margins in books or clearly explained lesson objectives. With each inspection, I felt judged, belittled and unconfident. I no longer had faith in my creative ideas and started keeping lessons "safe" (boring) rather than try out new ideas. I had planned a treasure hunt to teach about angles in one lesson but when I heard that I was going to be observed I decided it wasn't worth the worry of making sure everything was in place. Instead, we stuck to reading notes from a book. Back home teachers share ideas and work together. I remember working on a unit for aboriginal studies and asking the principal for help. He gave me lots of brilliant suggestions, but also encouraged me to try out new ideas. That year we built aboriginal shelters, performed animal puppet shows and had a treasure hunt. But in the UK your peers only tell you what you're doing wrong and even if colleagues are on your side, no one wants to speak out against senior management because they are afraid of losing their jobs.

Marking and planning is also dictated by OFSTED. In Australia, we plan for ourselves and only mark if there is a point to it; we certainly do not mark every piece of work. We mark how we like, with whatever colour we like and we use stickers and stamps. Yet in this country I am expected to stay late or take more than 100 books home to comb through. The children are not given stickers or stamps, there are no positive comments and we cannot mark in red pen because apparently the children will associate it with negative things. All this adds extra pressure, and leads to an ever-growing workload, as well as stressing out and demoralising teachers. And none of it benefits the children. In fact, the poor kids in this country must be bored to tears – all because senior management teams are terrified of Ofsted.

I will leave this country with my creative spirit crushed, my ability to make lessons fun diminished and my confidence lost. I used to love teaching, but now each day is a struggle. I feel forced into a box, and bullied into a predetermined shape. There is no room for me to have my own unique teaching style, and I miss my old fun and quirky teacher self. I did not enter teaching to be constantly monitored and told I am not good enough. I'm lucky to have an escape route and a better place to go, and I feel awful for those left behind. That's why I am speaking out. To save education in this country teachers desperately need to be trusted, appreciated, acknowledged, and given the space to do what they do best: teach.

A PARENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Several years ago, my parent group (Lewisham Parent ENGage) contacted Amanda Spielman, Head of Ofsted, to request a meeting. We were surprised at the speed of the response and her agreement to meet. We wanted to talk to her about the impact of poor Ofsted reports on our schools and how the schools had been turned upside down by leadership changes, which included publicly ranking children by their performance, with no support for pupils placed at the bottom of rankings. We wanted her to understand this impact.

Aside from this, we wanted Ofsted to consider different datasets in a school. Rather than just academic performance, these included such things as how schools look after the wellbeing of their pupils, the provision of extra curricular activities and how young people are prepared for the next steps in their lives to become young citizens. We wrote and shared a paper with Ms Spielman containing our ideas. Whilst she was interested, nothing seems to have changed. As a parent with a child in Y11, I really do feel that our education system needs an overhaul to remove the high stakes built into exams and inspections. Nobody should be so worried about an inspection that they live in fear of it.



Written by Nicky Dixon (Lewisham parent and member of CASE NEC)

Here is an extract from the extremely thoughtful and detailed list of questions and comments submitted to MS Spielman by Lewisham Parent ENGage. The extract relates to the list of questions sent to parents of a school that is about to be inspected by OFSTED. These questions (officially named “Parent View”) are formulated as statements with which parents are invited to “strongly agree”, “agree”, “neither agree nor disagree” etc etc. In the extract, Lewisham Parent ENGage first of all comments on the existing list of “questions” and then suggests alternatives, to many of which Ms Spielman offers a response.

Parental responses currently sought by OFSTED

1. **My child is happy at this school** - Perhaps this could be rephrased as “My child enjoys attending this school”, rather than being a “state of mind” question.
2. **My child feels safe at this school** - In what context? E.g. Is the building safe? Perhaps the question about bullying should come before this one?
3. **My child makes good progress at this school** - Perhaps the question about the receipt of information should come before this one. How can a parent measure progress without appropriate information (e.g.learning plans, homework and test results, plans for learning new skills)?
4. **My child is well looked after at this school** – Does this refer to personal welfare or to the provision of pre- and post-school accommodation and/or extra-curricular activities?
5. **My child is taught well at this school** – See the comments on Q3 and Q11.
6. **My child receives age-appropriate homework** - How can a parent judge this? A parent will know if a child finds the homework too easy or too difficult, but that does not necessarily mean that it is or is not appropriate.
7. **This school makes sure its pupils are well behaved** - How can a parent judge this? If a child receives daily detention does that mean the school is effectively dealing with behaviour? Perhaps the root cause is not being dealt with.
8. **This school deals effectively with bullying** – Only the parents of children who have been subject to bullying can judge this.
9. **This school is well led and managed** - How would parents know?
10. **This school responds well to any concerns I raise** -OFSTED cannot evaluate the answer to this without also knowing how valid the “concerns” were in the first place.
11. **I receive valuable information from the school about my child’s progress** - “Valuable” does not seem the right word to use; “appropriate” may be better.
12. **Would you recommend this school to another parent?** - The response sought here is binary, but it may be more helpful to have a free text box to explain why the response has been chosen.

Very few parents seem to respond to Parent View. How does Ofsted interpret responses that represent a small population of a school?

Parent ENGage views with Ms Spielman's comments (where provided) in bold type

1. For an All-Through School, Ofsted gives an overall rating. Parents would find it more useful to have ratings by phase: nursery, primary and secondary. **Ofsted cannot legally do this, but they can highlight**



issues with respect to phases.

2. For a school rated Good or better, do parents agree with the rating? **Good question but contentious. Parents can engage with Ofsted anytime if they think that a school is not providing service consistent with its rating.**
3. If a school is rated Requires Improvement or Inadequate:
 - a. Is pupil premium being used effectively to support pupils with additional needs and is this appropriately advertised on the school's website? **Ofsted checks website compliance but does not have the resources to do more.**
 - b. Are you aware of pupils leaving the school before exams? **Ofsted is focussing on this.**
 - c. Is the school data on performance, exclusions being appropriately logged? **Difficult to measure, but do talk to teachers.**
 - d. Is the school stable in terms of staff recruitment and retention? **Good question – a stable workforce fits in with a school providing a good standard of education.**
 - e. Are the school improvement plans shared with teachers and parents?
 - f. Does the school have parent governors and / or a PTA?

Readers will judge Ms Spielman's answers for themselves.

CASE Meeting with Stephen Dillon

Just before Easter, representatives from CASE NEC had a meeting scheduled with Stephen Morgan, Shadow Schools Minister. In the event, Mr Morgan was called away just before the meeting so his place was taken by Senior Parliamentary Researcher, Stephen Dillon, who put forward a list of issues that Labour does not think the government is addressing adequately or, even, at all. These were:

1. Teacher recruitment and retention, which is now in crisis.
2. School buildings, which are increasingly in a state of disrepair.
3. The increasingly narrow nature of the school curriculum and the increasingly unsuitable nature of the way pupil learning is assessed.
4. The widening gap in learning between disadvantaged and other children which, at the current rate of progress, will take 10 years just to return to 2019 levels.
5. The inadequacy of school funding.
6. The inadequacy of reforms to provision for SEND pupils.
7. The misguided and over-controlling approach to Initial Teacher Education, which has resulted in a 25% loss of providers.

Labour's proposals for remedying these and other perceived shortcomings of current policy include:

1. Labour will increase spending on the recruitment and professional development of teachers. The latter will include the provision of professional careers advice and there will be a concerted effort to restore the trust of teachers that the present government has lost.



2. Stephen Dillon did not specify but implied that Labour will remedy the growing defects in school buildings.
3. Labour will seek expert professional and academic opinion on the reform of the curriculum and the way in which pupil learning is assessed.
4. Given the strong evidence that they improve attendance, behaviour and learning outcomes, Labour will introduce breakfast clubs into every primary school.
5. In addition, Labour will increase school funding and will pay for it, in part, by ending the tax breaks currently given to those who claim “non-domiciled” status and by ending charitable status for most private schools.
6. Labour is still formulating policy for SEND pupils and announcements are expected before the next party conference.
7. The same is true for Initial Teacher Education.

In addition to the specific issues and proposed remedies listed above, Labour is proposing to modify the outcomes of school inspections by abolishing the current single grade rating and replacing it with a more detailed and nuanced “report card” approach. Labour would also like to see a mental health adviser in every school, given the alarming increase in mental health problems affecting schoolchildren. Also, under Labour, there will be less “micro-management” of schools by government and Heads and staff will have more professional autonomy. However, the governance of MATs (multi-academy trusts) will be inspected more frequently.

Labour will be consulting widely during the summer as to how best to implement some of these outline ideas, such as the “report card” to replace OFSTED single ratings, and more detailed proposals will be taken to Conference.

Finally, Stephen Morgan will attempt to arrange a second meeting with CASE.

COMMENT

Twice in recent days Rishi Sunak has raised the issue of the rather negative attitude that most of our citizenry has to the study of Maths. Not unreasonably, he believes that the post-16 study of Maths should not be optional and has announced that he is consulting with experts as to what aspects of the subject should be compulsory for post-16 students.

Many people will consider that perhaps the most important skill that most students would benefit from is a grasp of basic statistics. If students did develop such a grasp, it might make politicians think twice about the misuse of statistics that characterises most political discourse.

Unfortunately, there is a statistic that Mr Sunak needs to recognise: there is a great shortage of Maths teachers and an even bigger shortage of good ones...