
Ofsted Inspection as Existential Threat

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ABSTRACT This article exposes the fear that is at the heart of the Ofsted inspection process. It presents a challenge to Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman. She must tread carefully if she is to reform Ofsted and our broken accountability system.

Ofsted Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman's remarks about workload and SATs preparation made to LBC Radio last September are very welcome and long overdue. As she acknowledged, Ofsted has contributed massively to workload issues and it's good that this is being recognised at long last. Similarly, Director of Inspection Sean Harford's attempts at myth-busting are helpful and well-intentioned, even if not yet fully accepted by many schools and teachers. Ofsted needs to ask itself why such myths persist. The Chief Inspector needs to ask why inspection is viewed in the way it is.

The answer is a very uncomfortable one which Ofsted has failed utterly to understand; there is a deep and profoundly disturbing issue which has never been properly acknowledged. Inspection as it has been conducted under a succession of Ofsted regimes is not just anxiety producing; it is felt by many, if not all, teachers as an existential threat.

This is easy to say, but how best to articulate it? Here's my attempt as I put words into the mind of a primary head teacher expecting an inspection under the current framework:

I'm not just nervous at the prospect of our school being inspected; I'm viscerally scared. I may not have shown it at home or to the staff and the governors; I hope I don't show it to the children in assembly this morning; I wonder if you, the lead inspector, have any idea of how I and the rest of the staff feel. Hopefully, hopefully, you do but...

I wonder what sort of person you are. Do you view things half-full or half-empty? Are you coming in with a supportive or with a critical mind-set? Are you going to judge the school by comparing

us to supposedly 'outstanding' schools or are you going to be reasonable and appreciate that we can't all be super human and that some schools face particularly difficult challenges?

But then, have you really been a head or even full-time teacher? If so, you must have had bad lessons as well as good ones, good days as well as bad ones. Can you remember what it's really like in school day in, day out – trying to do the best for the children but knowing you don't, or can't, always succeed?

Perhaps we won't over the next couple of days; who knows? There's so many things that aren't under my control, including my nerves. There's so many things that could go wrong in a school of this size. As head I can't guarantee anyone's actions and reactions, my own, the staff's and yours included.

The unpredictability that makes teaching fascinating is so hard to bear under the cold scrutiny of inspection. The spontaneity which makes a lesson come alive cannot be planned for, cannot be ensured; it seems to just happen or not ... more likely not, given the forced, unreal atmosphere created in part by the presence of you, the Other.

Can you understand that?

Teaching is so incredibly uncertain; I think we can judge if lessons are going well, if the children are learning, if they are absorbed, if there is a 'buzz' around the school, but our feelings and judgements are fallible, especially in this stressful situation. Aren't yours?

As a staff we're giving so much of ourselves during the inspection; we're putting so much of ourselves on the line. We are what and how we teach. It's not just that our livelihoods or our personal pride may be at risk if things go badly; it's that our integrity as teachers and as persons is under threat. If in your judgement the school is judged inadequate or even in need of improvement, what does that say about us? We will remember what you say and write for the rest of our lives. Your words will weigh so very heavily.

Please choose them carefully.

Then there's the aftermath of the experience – an experience thought through over and over again, as the published report is scrutinised by the primary head teacher in a kind of self-imposed educational post-mortem:

'Requires improvement' ... a sense of anti-climax and deflation. Our school summarised in two words; our efforts slighted in a small number of syllables; a label we're compelled to wear until the next inspection. Levels may have been abolished, thank goodness, but not those stark Ofsted summary grades that will define us for the next few years.

The report makes for deadening, depressing reading. The school it attempts to describe could be almost any one and anywhere. There's no individuality; no bespoke description or analysis. It's written in a formulaic way – perhaps it's even pasted from a number of others.

The staff and I can barely recognise the description offered of our school. Where's the attempt to capture the spirit of what we're trying to do? Where's the 'deep description' of the work the children are doing, how much do they like being at our school or how much do they feel part of our school? Why is there no reference at all to the work we do in art, music, drama and humanities which complement the two core subjects that seem Ofsted's paramount overriding concern?

How can the report claim to judge the progress we've been making or trying to make? The same inspectors weren't here last year or at the last inspection; they aren't employing the same criteria or necessarily interpreting the criteria in the same or even similar way. The data from the last inspection related, however imperfectly, to children many of whom have now left the school; their data cannot be meaningfully be compared to ours this school year ... but they are.

How can the report appear to be so definitive? There's no sense that the judgements could be fallible or tentative; there's no appreciation that things might have been different the day before the inspection, let alone the month before. There's no acknowledgement that so much would have been missed during the inspection itself by happenstance. Would the same report have been written if the visit had been the week before or the week after?

So many questions but no opportunity to get them answered now that our inspection team has departed never to return.

But still that two-word judgement has been passed down from on high. Our school requires improvement and so do we. Of course we do; no school is perfect; all could be improved; all require improvement if we are to do the very best possible for the young people in our care. But clearly we are deemed to require it more than most.

We feel guilty...

But then, looking at the report for the hundredth time, it doesn't feel like the report of *our* school at all. Perhaps, just perhaps, it isn't...

In her remarks cited at the beginning of this short article the Chief Inspector was mistaken about what her priorities should be. Though very important, reducing teacher workload should not be her top priority. Instead she should be combating the visceral fear and post-inspection guilt that is an essential part of

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teachers' reality, and that means combating accountability (and with it inspection) as they are currently conceived. She will need to choose her words very carefully.

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