
Book Review

Pushing Back to Ofsted: safeguarding and the legitimacy of Ofsted's inspection judgements – a critical case study

RICHARD HOUSE, 2020

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Wynstones School of Whaddon, Gloucestershire, a Steiner school taking pupils from 3 to 19 years of age, was closed in January 2020 after an Ofsted inspection report. The school had 265 pupils enrolled. Fees for attending were £7000-10,000 per year. Wynstones School had been inspected by Ofsted twice in the previous year. In March 2019, it was found to be 'Inadequate' in every inspection category. In October, standards in certain categories were found to have been met, including those to do with the safety of pupils and the processes pertaining to staff recruitment. Standards in other categories were judged to remain unmet. The school's boarding provision had been inspected (and found 'Inadequate') in November 2018.

Across the previous decade, the school had been inspected three times by the School Inspection Service, a body responsible for inspecting particular kinds of private school and further education college. The quality of the work was criticised by the head of Ofsted and the service ceased to operate at the start of 2019. Wynstones School was inspected by the School Inspection Service most recently in 2017. It was categorised as 'Good'.

The Ofsted inspection in January 2020, which led to the closure of Wynstones School, is interrogated in detail across the central portion of Richard House's short book. House is, among other things, an experienced Steiner teacher. He sees the closure of the school as a grave injustice. He argues that Ofsted is not a fit body to judge the quality of education provided in Steiner schools since Ofsted's view of what constitutes acceptable educational provision is incompatible with the approach undertaken in such schools. He finds Ofsted in thrall to an audit culture and a 'low-trust, procedure- and protocol-dominated ideology' (p. 46), inimical to the notion of extending to individuals trust in their professional judgement and expertise. He further argues that the heightened attention presently paid to matters of safeguarding and child protection helps extend 'dataveillance', threatens personal liberties and repositions teachers in an insupportable way.

Although House has written the bulk of the text, the book is a gathering of several different kinds of writing from a number of hands. An appendix offers 20 pages of quotations from 29 families powerfully affected in a range of ways by the closure of the school. These are organised under various headings but are otherwise free-standing, without attendant argument. A foreword and afterword critique Ofsted as an institution and criticise the way it conceives of school inspection. Professor Saville Kushner argues in his foreword that quality-assurance processes for schools should be based not on backward-looking accountability but on an orientation towards change in the future. A focus on accountability generates risk-aversion and the language of compliance and self-justification. It does not help a school to improve.

The main text begins by introducing distinctive features of an education according to Steiner principles. Steiner's opposition to what is termed the 'mechanistic, positivist, one-sided intellectualism' of mainstream approaches to teaching and learning, and the 'quasi-authoritarian ideology, that almost unnoticed, arguably infects much conventional schooling', is brought out (p. 21). Since Steiner education has much to say about the soul and spirit, elements of its mysticism are acknowledged:

the *being-qualities* of the teacher are seen as ... more important than the amount of purely factual information that the teacher knows ... Education at its best is also seen by Steiner as being an intrinsically *healing force* for the child. (p. 21, original emphasis)

Steiner's hostility to modern technology is noted, as is his opposition to the practice of school inspection. Steiner education is characterised as 'an impressively coherent and comprehensive "post-modern", "new paradigm" antidote to the worst excesses of a materialistic worldview' (p. 22). It aims to foster 'creativity, imagination and a holistic understanding of the world' (p. 22). Nothing is said about Steiner's belief in reincarnation or his racist views of human development.

This introduction is followed by a chapter about the complexities of safeguarding. A principle reason cited for Wynstones School's closure was its failure to safeguard children. House regards this as 'a pretext' (pp. 35, 65, 82). Contemporary concerns around safeguarding and risk are, he says, 'replete with tensions and confusions' (p. 35). These concerns have enabled a further extension of state surveillance into the lives of families and the work of professionals such as teachers. A 'prevailing obsession with safeguarding' (p. 61) constitutes what some see as a 'manic, fear-driven and heavily bureaucratised ... culture' (p. 43). Children's worlds have become 'over-controlled' (p. 40) as faith in professional judgement and thoughtfulness has been eroded. House contends that 'couching safeguarding concerns within [Ofsted's] inflexible rule-bound proceduralism' (p. 35) generates its own abuses and undermines the validity of Ofsted's judgements. The chapter also touches on risk-aversion, loss of resilience and the erosion of children's freedoms. All these are real issues in today's society but only tangentially to do with schools. At the heart of

safeguarding children in school is the prevention of physical, emotional or sexual abuse perpetrated by one child on another, or by an adult on a child. House prefers to engage at the general level rather than spell this out and consider the responsibilities for school staff which consequently arise.

Arguments about issues in the abstract give place across the middle part of the book to a detailed analysis of the report on the Ofsted inspection carried out in January 2020. Ofsted found a wide range of failings, including in curricular provision, pedagogical practice, assessment procedures, provision for special educational needs and disabilities, and leadership. A small number of criticisms echo those made in the School Inspection Service's inspection report of 2017. House begins his analysis with the section on safeguarding. The report found children 'at serious risk of harm and not protected when they should be ... [c]hild protection issues ... not dealt with in line with statutory safeguarding requirements' and some staff not reporting 'serious safeguarding concerns relating to pupils' worrying behaviours' (p. 43). House questions who is to judge whether a situation is serious or what might entail 'worrying behaviours'. But advice is readily available from Department for Education and Home Office sources – in particular, in the substantial document *Keeping Children Safe in Education*, which offers help for practitioners in identifying such a situation or in becoming more sensitive to the possibility that one exists. House asks whether, when it comes to deciding what constitutes 'a safeguarding situation that warrants investigation and needs acting upon', trust is best reposed in a written set of rules and procedures rather than in 'sentient and professional human beings in specific contexts' (p. 43). Yet the entire thrust of the support available through ministerial and local authority documentation, training, updated information and reporting is away from tick-box responses towards enhancing practitioners' understanding, the better to enable them to make good decisions.

House skips past the specific statement in the Ofsted report about the school's failings with regard to 'statutory safeguarding requirements'. The answer to his question about who defines a child protection matter as serious is made manifest there. The law does so. Part of Ofsted's role is to see whether statutory duties are being upheld.

House claims that Ofsted's judgements are 'unavoidably subjective' (p. 47), implying that they have no more status and validity than anyone else's. Judgement is indeed from a position, and perfect objectivity is unobtainable, but inspectors are informed by what they see and hear during the inspection – by conversations with young people as well as with school leaders; by responses to the parental questionnaire they circulate; by looking at books and lessons; by consideration of the school's records, policies and procedures; and by exam and test scores. Their judgements are evidenced. House seems to acknowledge this elsewhere when he questions the validity of the way Ofsted interprets this evidence.

The criteria against which Ofsted judges the evidence obtained during an inspection are set out in public documents such as the 'School Inspection Handbook'. School leaders, who must ready the school for inspection, and

governors or trustees with ultimate responsibility, will be well aware of them. When Wynstones School failed its Ofsted inspection on all counts in March 2019 its future was self-evidently at stake. Yet those responsible for ensuring the school's future – the trustees – receive only a single passing and uncritical mention in this book.

The school was judged to have failed to keep adequate records, update procedures and maintain suitable policies, notably with regard to safeguarding matters. House argues that these things do not help keep children safe. He quotes Lord Laming (not 'Lammy', as twice appears on page 59, and also in the index), the judge who oversaw the public inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié. Laming's quoted words are to the effect that no system or set of procedures can guarantee that a child will come to deliberate harm. But House forgets that the whole orientation of the Laming report was to urge improvement to the system and to recommend ways to strengthen procedures, practices and means of managerial oversight in order to mitigate as far as possible against such harm. The trust reposed in professionals with regard to safeguarding is necessarily buttressed by policies, systems and processes within which they are contracted to work, so that they can more securely understand and discharge their duty and be held responsible. Failure to keep proper records, to be duly diligent in recruitment or to follow statutory requirements abets those who seek to endanger children. In follow-up evidence to the House of Commons Health Committee Lord Laming said: 'We cannot operate a system where the safety and well being of children depends upon the personal inclinations or ability or interests of individual staff. It is the organisations which must accept accountability' (The Victoria Climbié Inquiry Report; 6th Report of Session 2002-03, p. 12). And, for accountability, there must be a trail of evidence, a written record of decisions taken. House would seem to stand against this view. He writes:

written records [are] a leitmotif of the bureaucratic Audit Culture ... that ... has no place in our schooling system, and which is again underpinned by an uncritical embracing of an all-pervasive 'culture of fear' in which The Paper Trail and the meticulous recording of everything take precedence, and become the privileged ... metric by which schools are assessed and judged. (p. 56)

He would seem to hold that a Steiner teacher should simply be trusted to exercise their judgement without support or review in relation to safeguarding matters. Yet, according to the Ofsted report, the school's designated safeguarding lead 'was unable to confirm what action had been taken to respond to welfare concerns about children' (p. 54). Nothing is said in the book about this very specific failure.

Later sections of the book explore what is presented as a clash between Steiner educational approaches and the approach it is believed Ofsted favours – for example, with regard to literacy development. House argues throughout that it is unfair for Ofsted to judge as 'Inadequate' 'a pedagogical system that does

not fall in sufficiently with its own ideology' (p. 88). Yet where does that leave, for example, the Steiner school in Norwich, a school in which House himself once worked? In May 2019, very shortly after Wynstones School was judged 'Inadequate', the Norwich Steiner School was graded 'Good' by Ofsted. Its inspection report explicitly acknowledges the educational philosophy of the school. Wynstones School was itself judged 'Good' when inspected by Ofsted in 2007.

How the quality of educational provision may best be evaluated is complex and contested. What counts as 'quality' is subject to change, as is what counts as worthwhile knowledge and what is required for due diligence in safeguarding matters. Ofsted's approach to inspection rightly attracts severe criticism, as does its supposed conception of what makes for 'a good education'. House adds his share. But in what it says about safeguarding in schools, his book misses the mark.

A new board of trustees aims to reopen Wynstones School by September 2021. In a letter written to the school community and posted online, they declare themselves 'committed to finding a way to combine the principles and practice of Waldorf education with modern educational theory and standards'. Perhaps they will do so.

Patrick Yarker

**ANOTHER WAY OF LOOKING:
Michael Armstrong's writing for
*FORUM***

Edited by PATRICK YARKER, SUE COX
& MARY JANE DRUMMOND

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