

# Letters

## Dear Editors,

As revealed by the examination debacle and the interruption of national testing in the summer of 2020, assessment in both primary and secondary schools is in disarray. Why is this?

Is it the fault of politicians such as Gibb with predilections of their own, remote from classroom reality? Partly. Is it the fault of the DfE staffed by civil servants many of who have never assessed, let alone taught, actual children? Partly. Is it the fault of the government's closed coterie of 'advisers' and sycophants with their own educational and even mercenary agendas, involving conflicts of interest they never acknowledge? Again partly. Is it the result of Ofsted and its macho chief inspectors placing too much reliance on assessment data in their overall highly problematic gradings, despite data's contestable reliability and validity? Yet again partly. Or, dare I say it, is it the fault of too many school leaders failing to challenge, and sometimes even compounding, the unrealistic demands made on their students and staff by ministers, the DfE, Ofqual and Ofsted? The answer is yet again – partly.

But the mess is also the result of misconceptions about the nature of the learning that is being assessed. Too often school learning is conceived and discussed as if it were a material object. Objects can be apprehended by the five senses; they can be measured with a degree of precision in three dimensions; they can be quantified. But learning in school has none of those properties. It cannot be seen; it cannot be subject to conventional measurement; it cannot be quantified; it is intangible; it can only be inferred. It is a series of complex interacting processes which are only partly understood and whose end product is multi-dimensional but not literally three-dimensional.

Assessment of learning cannot be made accurate or precise by replacing one inadequate set of metrics by another or by supplementing metrics with other partial indicators of students' learning.

Underlying the assessment problem is a fact that few of us are prepared to acknowledge. We need to recognise, not shamefacedly but honestly, the extent of our limited understanding of school learning despite the recent overblown claims of cognitive science. We have no firm, reliable or systematic way of assessing young people's understanding. We can't get inside their heads – thank goodness. Like us, they cannot fully articulate what they are thinking and learning to help us assess where they are. The way they develop their understanding is amazingly complex, often idiosyncratic and far from adequately understood, even after a century or more of educational research.

Our technology of testing is crude, partial, grossly inadequate and discriminatory. The most we can reasonably claim at present is a largely intuitive, very partial and inevitably subjective form of assessment of learning borne out of working closely with our students over a period of time – talking with and observing them on a day-to-day basis. That reflects the complexity of learning, the idiosyncratic nature of children and young people, and the very limited extent of our knowledge. This is uncomfortable to acknowledge but it is the reality. We need to recognise it and work from there.

*Professor Colin Richards*

### **Dear Editors,**

I would like to take up a few points in Patrick Yarker’s otherwise excellent review of Richard House’s book *Pushing Back to Ofsted* (*FORUM*, Vol. 62 No. 3, 2020, pp489–493).

The review omits some of House’s important ideas and conclusions on safeguarding. On this question, Patrick Yarker argues that House ‘misses the mark’. He doesn’t. House argues that a safeguarding situation is best dealt with by sentient and professional individuals in each specific context rather than by a set of rules and procedures. Countering this, Patrick Yarker makes the extraordinary claim that ‘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’. If only this were true and not merely window-dressing! He then almost in the next sentence informs us that it is the law which decides if a child protection matter is serious or not, and Ofsted’s role is to uphold the law. Ofsted inspections are overwhelmingly characterised by an aggressive demand for compliance with the law, in the form of an ever-increasing burden of written regulations. Ofsted appears not to have caught up with the new ‘thrust’.

Yarker ignores a most important point about safeguarding in House’s book – namely, that as law professor Lauren Devine has shown, ‘the law’ on safeguarding is open to wide interpretation; yet Ofsted interprets it in its own narrow way and then imposes this interpretation on schools as if it were the only one. House provides chapter and verse on this core issue, yet the review ignores it.

Yarker also claims that ‘inspectors are informed by what they see and hear during inspections’. Quite so – but as House correctly observes, their perceptions are arguably riven with confirmation bias (which again House discusses at length).

However, it is Patrick Yarker’s gratuitous comment regarding Rudolf Steiner’s so-

called 'racism' which is most surprising in the review. First, because it is demonstrably not true, and second, because it is not germane to House's book. Steiner's writings cannot be described as racist by any standards. His whole teaching is opposed to any and all forms of prejudice. This is quite evident in the thirty-odd books which he authored. There are in the over 6000 published lectures a few passages which, taken out of context, would be construed as racist by today's standards; but these published lectures are not his own words. Steiner always lectured without notes and never had time to correct or edit the manuscripts of his lectures, put together from notes taken by members of the audience, before publication. This is evident to anyone who is familiar with the lectures, and is explicitly mentioned in the preface to most of the published texts.

This misconception about Steiner has been adequately countered in print many times, and even in a court case, but is still given currency by ignorant and mischievous elements. It is a pity that writers in the academic world such as Dr Yarker repeat such things.

*Jonathan Swann*

Steiner Waldorf mathematics teacher

*Patrick Yarker writes:*

Rudolf Steiner's use of racist language has been acknowledged even by his defenders. A hierarchical and essentialist understanding of 'race', attributing particular qualities to 'races' through 'blood' and supposed 'racial character', is a foundational element of Steiner's thinking across many years. Steiner's thinking – an anti-materialist amalgam of esoteric occultist and anthroposophic notions bound up with ideas of physical and spiritual evolution – forms the basis on which Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy rests. Not to have drawn attention to the racism integral to it would have been a dereliction of duty.