

Save education

Defenestrate Ofsted and the Department for Education

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Abstract

The Department for Education sees school education as responding to what its ministers perceive as the economic demands of the future. They fail to recognise the need for young people to be prepared for the ecological problems on the horizon, such as climate change, economic turmoil and the human consequences of a global shortage of food, water and energy. I argue that a National Education Council for Schools is needed which should ensure that it is the professionalism of teachers that directs the education of the young in preparing them for what the world of their adulthood may be like. Hence, I come to the momentous conclusion that the Department for Education and its enforcement arm, Ofsted, should be abolished. In the more evocative term used in my title, they should be defenestrated.

Keywords: abolish Department for Education; future ecological problems; establish National Education Council; trust teachers

Fears for the future

I grieve at what is happening in our schools and fear for the future of the rising generation. They are being prepared for an economic world that is slowly crumbling and cannot be rebuilt. They are not being prepared to tackle creatively whatever problems (inevitably now unknown) may arise in their lifetimes.

What we can expect is that these problems will arise from climate change, economic turmoil and the human consequences of global shortage of food, water and energy. We can hope that future generations will find ways to establish sustainable ways of living with a reasonable quality of life for themselves and for their successors across the planet. The legacy that we will leave them is much worse than the one we inherited. At least we should ensure that they receive an education that equips them for troubled times.

Defenestration

Language is amazing: fancy having a word for chucking something out of a window! According to Wikipedia: ‘Defenestration is the act of throwing someone or something out of a window. The term was coined around the time of an incident in Prague Castle

in the year 1618 which became the spark that started the Thirty Years' War'.¹ But dictionaries also give a second meaning: 'The action of forcing someone, especially a leader, out of his or her job'.² It is this use of the word that I employ in calling this essay 'Save education: defenestrate Ofsted and the DfE'. The aim is to end (not start) the 30-year war in England between a government department and the profession of teaching.

The 30 years began in 1992 when Ofsted was created 'to improve the quality of education across the UK'.³ In intention it was to ensure that schools enacted new government policies on education. In practice Ofsted has been disastrous, as have some of the policies introduced by the Department for Education, such as academisation. Much of the work of the Department for Education should be transferred to a National Education Council for Schools composed of representatives of teachers, parents, academics and others with a stake in education, and Ofsted should be disbanded with its current funding distributed to local authorities for local inspectorates.

Yes, the Department for Education and Ofsted should be defenestrated (second meaning) and more enlightened ways found for carrying out their erstwhile functions.

Education

It may sound pedantic, but anyone who aims to talk or plan constructively about schools should first make clear what they understand by education. This is my view, which I believe is shared by most teachers and educationists:

The great purposes of education are to enable individual citizens to be capable of thinking for themselves, to give them the intellectual tools that ensure they can survive and prosper, to help them to be moral beings supportive of their fellows, to equip them with the many and varied attributes that they can learn in their years of schooling, and enable them to continue to develop and learn purposefully throughout their lives in a contented pursuit of worthwhile life, liberty and happiness.

These are the 'many and varied attributes' that young people should experience at school:

- learning how to relate to others peacefully and with mutual respect
- learning the skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, thinking and debating
- learning the mathematical skills needed in everyday life
- developing natural talents for creative art: writing, drawing, painting, dancing, making music
- learning healthy use of one's body through diet, exercise and sport
- learning to respect the natural world
- beginning to learn of the cultural wealth that one can spend one's life exploring in work and in leisure: science, history, geography, literature, philosophy, art, music,

languages and much else

- becoming a moral citizen with ethical standards and a commitment to community
- finding out when to be tolerant, when to be assertive and when to stand up for one's rights
- learning how to go on learning for the rest of one's life – and finding the pleasure of it
- learning to know and value oneself.

And through all of this, preparing for work, home and play in a world which will be more dangerous than now, because of global warming.

In all this, schools need to be, and mostly are, joyful places as they go about the business of preparing young people for the good life in terms of work, home and play. Teachers need to be, and mostly are, warm-hearted professional firebrands, inspiring the young: as philosophers have said since the time of the ancient Greeks, lighting fires not filling buckets. I fear many of our politicians do not understand this since they measure the success of schools in terms of SAT results at 11, GCSE results at 16 and numbers of entrants to universities at 18-plus. Because there can be no measure of a well-rounded person, politicians seem to ignore this as the ultimate aim of schooling.

Schooling for economic growth

The crisis in schools is caused by our national government. How is that? It is because our politicians respond to what they perceive as the economic demands of the future and fail to recognise the ecological problems on the horizon. This is what Nicky Morgan said when newly appointed as secretary of state for education: 'Now more than ever we need to ensure that more of our young people are leaving education, not just with the skills to succeed in modern Britain, but to compete in an increasingly global economy'.⁴ The evidence shows that the Department for Education continues to take this view of schooling to prepare for economic growth. Five of its present six ministers came into political life from marketing and business, and 11 of 12 senior staff have had no direct experience of school teaching.

If we look back to the start of this century, we find that the Department for Education has nearly always been led by people who have never experienced the hard labour, the occasional joy, the holding of the interest of a class of young people, the need for constant vigilance and the maintenance of good order, for four or five hours a day, and then going home with a pile of exercise books to be marked and lessons to be prepared, which is the daily experience of school teachers. Only one of the 12 secretaries of state of the department during this century so far has come from an earlier career as a school teacher,⁵ and only two of them have been in this office for more than two years, which is hardly long enough to learn from scratch what teaching demands.

Do we need ministers of education?

It is an interesting thought experiment to wonder what would happen to the education system if all six ministers took a six-months holiday? The answer is obvious. There would be no change. Our education system would continue to function: young people would still go to school; teachers continue to teach; governing bodies still meet; universities go on lecturing and doing research. Indeed, this would still be the case if the six never returned!

Competing in the future global economy is the justification given for the various measures that put pressure on primary schools to improve SATs results, and on secondary schools for better GCSE and A-level results in a narrow range of subjects.⁶ Our education system is currently designed to produce a workforce striving for growth in the national economy. The national curriculum is overloaded, its assessment oppressive, and teachers in state schools are seen by our national government as knowledge-transmitting and skills-training technicians who need to be given a manual and rule book in order to operate in a pupil factory, and who need rigorous inspection and regular pupil assessment to ensure that they are working at maximum efficiency and obeying the employer's rules.

So, when I seek to see the Department for Education defenestrated, it is so that our education system is not governed by people whose life experiences are in commercial, journalistic or desk-bound occupations and who see the purpose of schools as essentially preparation for similar work.

Schooling for ecological change

On 28 September 2020, *The Guardian* reported: 'World leaders pledge to halt Earth's destruction ahead of UN summit. Emmanuel Macron, Angela Merkel, Justin Trudeau, Jacinda Ardern and Boris Johnson are among 64 leaders from five continents warning that humanity is in a state of planetary emergency due to the climate crisis and the rampant destruction of life-sustaining ecosystems'.⁷ What they have done to honour this 'pledge' is doubtful since, on 28 February 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) delivered 'the bleakest warning yet' on the impact of global rising temperatures. This is an extract from *The Guardian* on that day:

The report says droughts, floods, heatwaves and other extreme weather are accelerating and wreaking increasing damage ... Allowing global temperature to increase by more than 1.5C above pre-industrial levels, as looks likely on current trends in greenhouse gas emissions, would result in some 'irreversible' impacts. These include the melting of ice caps and glaciers, and a cascading effect whereby wildfires, the die-off of trees, the drying of peatlands and the thawing of permafrost,

release additional carbon emissions, amplifying the warming further ... About half the global population - between 3.3 billion and 3.6 billion people - live in areas 'highly vulnerable' to climate change. Millions of people face food and water shortages owing to climate change, even at current levels of heating. Mass die-offs of species, from trees to corals, are already under way.⁸

Looking ahead, the future of our young people will entail surviving the changes in the global ecology rather than competing in the global economy. How do we prepare them for that? What changes in schooling would be needed? What is certain is that the national curriculum, as instigated by the Department for Education since 2014, will not prepare them for ecological survival. It is the most frightening document I have ever seen, being stuffed full of injunctions to teachers like this one: 'Pupils should be taught to: identify and name a variety of common animals including fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals' (year 1 science statutory requirement).⁹ In common with much else in the national curriculum, most of us learned these things from everyday experience, and did not need a statutory obligation to be taught them at a certain age.

My list of many and varied attributes set out above could provide sufficient guidance for schools, leaving teachers, professionally trained, to make appropriate school and classroom decisions to replace the national curriculum and give those whom they teach some preparation for the yet unknown periods of the future. Primary schools, with the common practice of one teacher, one class, one year, would find such a transition relatively easy, probably replacing subject periods by daylong projects. But for secondary schools with each week fragmented into short periods taught by teachers with different academic specialities, it would be more difficult to prepare their students for the ecological problems of the future. Could there be a radical change in which some of the school time is spent on community projects, such as giving support to the elderly, decorating and maintaining public buildings, and growing food on allotments?

The Department for Education

The government website says the Department for Education: 'is the UK government department responsible for child protection, education (compulsory, further and higher education), apprenticeships and wider skills in England'.¹⁰ On a later page it gives 'our priorities' starting with 'drive economic growth through improving the skills pipeline, levelling up productivity and supporting people to work' and later notes 'level up education standards so that children and young people in every part of the country are prepared with the knowledge, skills and qualifications they need ... Provide the best start in life through high-quality early education and childcare to raise standards and help parents to work'.

So, there we have it on a government website. The purpose of schools is to give the

knowledge, skills and qualifications that will drive economic growth and, at the same time, house young children in classrooms so that their parents can go to work! This is far removed from the great purposes of education that I set out above and which I believe to be shared by most teachers and educationists.

‘Drive economic growth’: these three words, in my view, sink the department. They may have been appropriate in the last century, but in the 21st, it must be ecology, not economy, that guides what happens in schools. These three words are why the Department for Education should be defenestrated.

Ofsted

Ofsted gives this description of itself: ‘Ofsted’s role is to make sure that organisations providing education, training and care services in England do so to a high standard for children and students. Every week, we carry out hundreds of inspections and regulatory visits throughout England and publish the results online. We report directly to Parliament and we are independent and impartial’.¹¹ It has a large staff: ‘We have around 1,800 employees across our 8 regions. We also directly contract with more than 2,300 Ofsted Inspectors to carry out inspections of schools and further education and skills provision’.

It was created in 1992. Until 2005, schools were inspected for a week every six years with two months’ notice. Then it changed to two- or three-day visits every three years with two days’ notice. Over the years there have been a number of changes in its criteria. One in 2009 resulted in a reduction from 19 per cent to 9 per cent in the number of schools judged outstanding and an increase from 4 per cent to 10 per cent of those judged inadequate. In 2012, the school description ‘satisfactory’ was changed to ‘requires improvement’.¹² By August 2021, Ofsted reported that ‘eighty-six per cent of all schools are good or outstanding’. So, does it need to continue to carry out ‘hundreds of inspections’ every week?

There have been many challenges to Ofsted. For example, in 2017 Professor Frank Coffield (of the Institute of Education, London) wrote *Will the Leopard Change its Spots? A New Model for Inspection by Ofsted*.¹³ He concluded: ‘Does Ofsted do more harm than good? The evidence shows that, despite some benefits, Ofsted’s methods are invalid, unreliable and unjust. Educators are diverted from looking after students to looking after inspectors’. In 2021, *The Guardian* had an article headed: “‘I can’t go through it again’: heads quit over “brutal” Ofsted inspections’.¹⁴ Dr Mary Bousted, joint secretary of the National Education Union, commented on this in a tweet: ‘Brutal is the word. Ofsted has no credibility left with the profession’.¹⁵

Is Ofsted still needed after 30 years? No! Certainly, the work of teachers in schools should be inspected from time to time to help ensure that they are as effective as possible

in educating the young, but the *modus operandi* of Ofsted is not the way to do it.

Ofsted could have been valuable if it had treated teachers respectfully as fellow professionals to be inspected cordially, challenged where necessary, and guided and supported when appropriate. But instead, throughout its 30 years of existence, it has engendered fear in those inspected and, where it found fault, conveyed its criticisms to public, parents and sometimes pupils in a way which could undermine confidence in the school and its head. Local authority inspectors/advisers, aware of the impact of local factors on school performance, able to establish effective working relationships with teachers in their areas and supported by a few national HMIs of distinction are the best way of supporting the work of schools and maintaining high standards. Yes, Ofsted should be defenestrated (second meaning) and its functions relocated with local inspectorates.

There is of course a problem with about half of our schools having left local authority oversight. Without necessarily changing the governing arrangements of schools, local authority oversight of all the schools (and young people) of their area needs to be restored.

A National Education Council for Schools

Much of the work of the Department for Education could, and should, be transferred to a National Education Council for Schools. This council should consist of an expert body of people with first-hand experience of schooling: teachers, union representatives, local education authority officers and inspector/advisers, and parents, with a few academics, business and professional people who have strong links with teaching. Unlike ministers who rarely spend more than two years with education, the members of this National Education Council for Schools should expect to spend at least five years conducting their oversight function, engaging in it on a part-time basis. Inevitably it would be a large body and so should be led in its work by a small number of full-time officials with relevant experience, who report regularly to the council and take guidance from it. Some of these people might come from the closed-down department.

The council's function would be to advise schools, teachers, governors and parents, as well as parliament, government, local authorities, professional bodies and the general public, on significant issues in educational practice and on the perceived educational needs of future society.¹⁶ To those ends, it should conduct, and support, educational research. The key word here is *advise*. Unlike the present control of education, where requirements from a government department are monitored by Ofsted, there would be recommendations and advice on good practice coming from the council, but no enforcement. Decisions about curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and evaluation in classrooms and schools should be determined by teachers, because it is they who know best what their pupils need.

An obvious first task for the council would be to define a mutually acceptable definition of education. This might not be easy, but unless the members of the council know what they stand for, how can they operate? Early on it should tackle two major questions about school assessments:

Are government tests needed in primary education since checking on what has been learned is an essential part of the regular work of teachers?

My view is 'not needed'.

Can secondary school examinations be replaced by the recommendations of the Tomlinson (2004) Report that GCSEs, A- and AS-Levels, BTECs and AVCEs (Advanced Certificate of Vocational Education) be replaced by end-of-schooling diplomas?¹⁷

My view is 'yes to Tomlinson'.

Decisions arising from these considerations would need one or more acts of parliament to resolve.

From this, the council should begin to examine critically other aspects of the state of national education in schools. Issues like:

- teachers' and other school workers' morale and concerns over workload
- young people's wellbeing and reports of unhappiness among school children
- the roles of parents in relation to schooling
- the state, suitability and needful repair of school buildings.

Where problems are identified, the relevant authorities should be pressured to tackle them. Thereafter, the council could initiate research on aspects of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment of students, and evaluation and governance of schools, leading to the publication of non-mandatory guidance to schools on these matters.

Overall, the council should have an eye on visions of the future. It should state publicly that it is schools that must make educational decisions on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, based on teachers' professional knowledge of their students, guided by publications of the council, and in discussion with local community representatives. The funding of such a council should come from government. With the demise of the Department for Education and Ofsted, sufficient government funding should be available.

Free to design their own curriculum, schools could be preparing young people for what the world of their adulthood may be like. Of course, nobody knows for certain about that world, but books like Laurence Smith's *The New North: the World in 2050* and *The Collapse of Western Civilisation* by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway use extensive research findings to suggest it is likely to be very different from today.¹⁸ A National Education Council for Schools would ensure that it is the professionalism of teachers

that directs the education of our children, not the predilections of here-today, gone-tomorrow ministers.

Hence I come to the momentous conclusion that the Department for Education and its enforcement arm, Ofsted, should be abolished. In the more evocative term used in my title, they should be defenestrated.

Michael Bassey is an Emeritus Professor of Education of Nottingham Trent University with many years spent on teaching, training teachers and educational research. A *Guardian* profile described him as ‘ringleader of the Blob’ – this being the term of abuse that the then secretary of state for education Michael Gove used to describe the many academics who opposed his policies. Michael’s late wife, Penny, was head of a primary school during tempestuous years at the end of the 20th century: her experience turned him into a polemicist.

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Notes

1. Wikipedia, ‘Defenestration’, 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defenestration> (accessed 1 April 2022).
2. e.g., <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/defenestrate>
3. Onefile, ‘Why was Ofsted introduced?’, n.d., <https://onefile.co.uk/explore/why-was-ofsted-introduced/#:~:text=Under%20Thatcher%2C%20schools%20were%20still,And%20so%20Ofsted%20was%20born> (accessed 30 April 2022).
4. N. Morgan, ‘Closing the skills gap and our plan for education’, speech given at the American Enterprise Institute, Washington, 19 November 2014.
5. Estelle Morris. She resigned expressing difficulty in the ‘strategic management of a huge department’. Teacher union leaders expressed shock and sadness at her leaving.
6. GOV.UK, ‘SATs results show more primary pupils reach the highest standards’, 2009, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/sats-results-show-more-primary-pupils-reach-the-highest-standards> (accessed 1 April 2022); GOV.UK, ‘Improving GCSE and A level standard setting: a world of learning’, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-gcse-and-a-level-standard-setting-a-world-of-learning> (accessed 1 April 2022).
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8. F. Harvey, ‘IPCC issues “bleakest warning yet” on impacts of climate breakdown’, *The Guardian*, 28 February 2022.
9. Department for Education, ‘The national curriculum in England: Key stages

1 and 2 framework document', 2013, <http://www.gov.uk/dfe/nationalcurriculum> (accessed 1 April 2022).

10. GOV.UK, 'About us', <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education/about#:~:text=The%20Department%20for%20Education%20is,and%20wider%20skills%20in%20England> (accessed 1 April 2022).

11. *Ibid.*

12. Wikipedia, 'Ofsted', 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ofsted> (accessed 1 April 2022).

13. Frank Coffield, *Will the Leopard Change its Spots*, UCL Institute of Education, 2017.

14. A. Fazackerley, "'I can't go through it again': heads quit over "brutal" Ofsted inspections', *The Guardian*, 27 November 2021.

15. Mary Boustead writing on Twitter: 'Brutal is the word. Ofsted has no credibility left with the profession', 27 November 2021, <https://twitter.com/marybousteadneu/status/1464563015626407937> (accessed 1 April 2022).

16. The advice would be given to all schools: local authority, academy, independent. Note that it is 'advice' not 'requirement'; it is for schools themselves to make decisions.

17. Mike Tomlinson, '14-19 curriculum and qualifications reform. Final report on 14-19 reform', 2004, <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2004-tomlinson-report.pdf> (accessed 1 April 2022).

18. L. Smith, *The New North: The World in 2050*, Profile Books, 2012; N. Oreskes and E. Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilisation*, Columbia University Press, 2014.