

Denial and disregard

Ofsted's post-pandemic fall

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Abstract

The inspectorate's complex relationship with schools has been fraught with various difficulties over recent years, as shown through the ongoing formal and informal dialogue between the two. Prior to the Covid pandemic, there was a call from some quarters for a pause in inspection and a re-evaluation of Ofsted's core purpose. Following suspension of inspections during the pandemic, Ofsted's approach to recommencing routine inspections led to a marked deterioration in its relationship with schools. This piece uses evidence from extensive discussions with school leaders and staff, together with articles from the press and government publications over a four-year period, to show how Ofsted's decision to ignore the impact of Covid in pursuit of normality has led to the current crisis.

Keywords: inspection; pandemic; impact; crisis

Last month I was engaged in dialogue with my valued colleague, former senior HMI, Frank Norris. We were discussing the extraordinary challenges faced by schools over the Covid period, focusing on when Ofsted recommenced routine inspections during the summer term of 2021. At one point, Frank said, 'If only Ofsted had reported on what they saw, rather than what they wanted to see'.

The new 2019 inspection framework had been sold to schools on the basis of a fairer approach due to the shift in focus from outcomes to input – specifically curriculum. Many seemed to welcome the prospect of reduced emphasis on pupil performance data. However, by February 2020, less than six months after its introduction, it became clear that all was not well with the new framework.¹ The Headteachers' Roundtable group launched a 'Pause Ofsted' campaign, citing concerns about the 'one size fits all' approach, with some schools being unfairly disadvantaged by the framework. The campaign to pause inspections, so that reflection and re-evaluation of the core purpose of inspection could take place, gained traction through social media and was certainly gathering support amongst senior school leaders. In March 2020, Ofsted inspections were indeed paused, but this had nothing to do with the campaign.

The challenges of the pandemic

The many and varied challenges experienced by schools during the pandemic are well-documented. Schools across the UK closed from 20 March 2020 and staff quickly found

themselves plunged into a world of hastily organised remote learning, ‘Covid bubbles’, constant sanitising, face masks and staff rotas as schools were increasingly affected by illness and the need for staff to isolate. Two days earlier, the then secretary of state for education, Gavin Williamson, had announced that routine Ofsted inspections were being suspended. He said: ‘Given the pressures on our school leaders and their staff, it is only right that Ofsted temporarily suspends its routine inspection timetable. This will help schools to focus on their core functions at a difficult time’.² Within this statement was a clear acknowledgement that, in spite of efforts over the years to minimise the pressure of inspection and to improve its relationship with schools, Ofsted and stress were seemingly inseparable. Nevertheless, the decision was unquestionably a sensible move, given that no school in the country was operating normally. Lockdowns were imposed, lifted and imposed again; in the media, school staff were eulogised or vilified, the most frequent criticism relating to schools being ‘closed’ – although teachers were only too familiar with the immense pressures associated with keeping schools open throughout the pandemic, as well as working closely with their communities. Headteachers who had, in the past, felt anxious at the prospect of the Ofsted phone call, typically found themselves too busy and tired to even think about when inspections might start up again.

On 3 December 2020, the day after the second national lockdown ended, HMCI Amanda Spielman announced a ‘phased return’ to inspections, with monitoring inspections of inadequate schools beginning in January 2021 and routine graded inspections recommencing in the summer term.³ There was an underlying tone of urgency in the message – the need to return to ‘the usual level of scrutiny’ as we hope for ‘a greater level of normality’. Following the announcement, one headteacher contacted me. She explained that ‘It’s more chaotic than ever here’, and said that staff were ‘dropping like flies’. A return to inspection was literally the last thing she wanted to consider. She even suggested ways in which Ofsted might be able to provide practical help to schools, rather than focusing entirely on when they might be able to get back in schools to pass judgements and award grades. A UK government and parliament petition was organised: ‘Suspend all inspections until September 2022’. Unsurprisingly, it was rejected by parliament, having managed to collect just 13,000 signatures. Ironically, one headteacher told me that she was ‘too tired to be thinking about anything other than keeping the school going’.

A government drive towards the ‘new normal’ was certainly evident. On 13 December 2020, Greenwich Council was threatened with legal action by the government and ordered to keep schools open as several expressed the desire to move to online learning during the last week of term due to an exponential rise in Covid cases. During the Christmas holidays, Boris Johnson announced that all children should return to school after the break and reiterated this on television on 4 January. In his view schools were safe. The

following day he suddenly announced that all schools were to close immediately and so on 6 January, England entered a third national lockdown. Schools immediately switched back to remote learning until at least February half-term. Primary schools eventually reopened to all pupils on 8 March with secondaries following soon after.

I have vivid memories of conversations with many headteachers during the summer and autumn terms of 2021. Some said that children's behaviour and attitudes were noticeably worse from the beginning, others remarked that things seemed 'quite normal' to begin with, before serious issues became more apparent. Staff reported worrying patterns of behaviour including increased levels of anxiety with some children appearing clearly traumatised. A headteacher of a primary school in Manchester told me, 'One day I looked at the children in assembly and it suddenly hit me that over a third had suffered the loss of a close family member'. In some schools, particularly those serving the poorest communities, it was even worse, with large sections of the community grieving while others struggled with long-term health issues. To make matters worse, almost immediately, the pressure was on: the nation's children had 'fallen behind' and school staff would now need to work even harder to help them to catch up.

By the start of the autumn term 2021, following 18 months of utter turmoil, it looked as though inspections were back in full swing. A primary headteacher contacted me in October 2021, telling me that her school had received 'the call' on 20 September. She said that the inspection was 'the worst experience of my life'. The headteacher wanted to start the inspection with a discussion on how Covid had affected the school and community. However, the head recounted that one inspector said they 'had been told not to discuss Covid' and not to accept any 'excuses' linked to the pandemic. Instead, the discussion turned to phonics and curriculum plans. The school, which appeared to be desperately trying to hold itself together after a hugely disruptive period during Covid, was downgraded from 'good' to 'requires Improvement'. The report includes statements about pupils not remembering enough important knowledge and the teaching of phonics 'not yet' helping pupils to catch up. 'It was September and we still had Covid cases', said the headteacher, clearly distressed. 'I just wanted time to catch my breath before Ofsted turned up'.

Just a week earlier, at an Institute for Government event, Amanda Spielman made the highly controversial statement that some schools had prioritised delivering food parcels to the poorest children rather than ensuring a high-quality remote education for all.⁴ Predictably, this comment was not well-received by school staff who had made extraordinary efforts to care for their most vulnerable pupils. The evidence used as the basis for Spielman's statement is certainly questionable, given that inspections had only just restarted. By mid-November, I had spoken with a number of unhappy headteachers about their experiences of inspection. Common themes emerged: criticisms that primary subject leaders had not been sufficiently trained for their roles; uneven

progress across different subjects; pupils not catching up quickly enough. ‘When were the subject leaders supposed to have received this training?’, asked one headteacher, ‘Have Ofsted forgotten about Covid?’.

Ofsted’s neglectful response post-pandemic

From the accounts of many, this would indeed appear to have been the case. Attempts by staff, during inspection, to discuss the impact of the pandemic were simply brushed away by too many inspectors. Others appeared interested and even made notes about how the school had coped during the pandemic; however, this evidence was rarely detailed in the final inspection report. On 10 November 2021, Christopher Russell, Ofsted’s national director for education, wrote a blog entitled ‘Back into a routine: looking at schools in light of Covid’.⁵ This was a friendly toned conciliatory piece, clearly designed to calm and reassure: ‘Our expectation is that **all** inspections are grounded in a thorough understanding of the particular challenges a school has faced, and is still facing’. The blog did state, however, that ‘So far this term, we’re seeing many schools doing great work and we haven’t needed to describe the Covid impact in detail’. Each report included a standard sentence, informing readers that ‘Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with school leaders, and have taken that into account in their evaluation’. Many headteachers told me that this was simply not true, one saying that ‘Ofsted are in denial. They don’t want to admit that Covid ever happened’.

As the months went by and inspections continued, I heard from many more headteachers about inspectors’ unwillingness to talk about the impact of the pandemic. Examples included one inspector lifting a hand and saying, ‘Stop now, I’m not interested’, while another is reported to have said, ‘You have to stop thinking about Covid now, it’s all in the past’. A few inspectors had apparently told school leaders that they were ‘not allowed’ to discuss Covid, but refused to go into further detail. Ofsted was invariably reporting on what it wanted to see: detailed curriculum plans in all subjects, phonics and reading taught in a particular way, and deep dives revealing rigorous monitoring by subject leaders. At the same time, school leaders and staff faced daily struggles as the long-term impact of the pandemic simply would not go away. As one headteacher said, ‘the trouble with sweeping this stuff under the carpet is that eventually you trip over the bumps’.

Some of my most enjoyable work as HMI was carrying out thematic inspections. I travelled around the country, visiting a variety of schools to gather evidence on themes such as the deployment of support staff and the use of IT to support teaching and learning, as well as looking at teaching and learning within my own specialist subject. During such visits, our job was to record and evaluate precisely what we actually saw. This evidence was then collated and synthesised into informative reports that helped

shape future decisions affecting schools. Through this approach, we identified a great deal of excellent practice; pragmatic solutions that could be shared amongst schools with similar problems.

As schools tried to get back to 'business as usual' from September 2021, did we really need a return to routine school inspections? Might it not have been a better use of inspector time to gather evidence on the impact of the pandemic nationally and the measures taken by schools to support pupils, both in academic and pastoral terms? Although some research has been carried out on the impact of the pandemic and how this affected the work of schools, this would surely have been a golden opportunity to gather an extensive amount of evidence, which would have been invaluable in making decisions about how schools and pupils could best be supported, both in the immediate future and in the longer term.

If Ofsted had adopted this approach, what might it have seen and reported? A huge body of anecdotal evidence suggests the list may have included: a range of behavioural issues affecting pupils of all ages; indicators of trauma/mental health problems – not just in pupils, but in parents, teachers and headteachers too; significant difficulties in speech, language and communication; and underdeveloped social skills amongst pupils across the full age range. One pupil referral unit told me, just a few weeks ago, that the number of pupils in Years 7 and 8 who had been excluded from mainstream schools had increased by 400 per cent. In some schools, attendance figures have taken a sizeable dip and efforts to reduce absence are having limited impact.

Almost two years after Ofsted recommenced routine inspections, we continue to live with these issues. Ofsted, however, is seemingly intent on disregarding them, sticking firmly with judging schools against their set criteria and paying little attention to the unique context, challenges and successes of individual schools and their communities. In addition, Ofsted clearly has no interest in reporting issues related to school funding or recruitment and retention of school staff, both of which are having a profound impact on the work of schools. I am left wondering whether Ofsted's mantra of reporting without fear or favour has been diminished and is now rather meaningless and irrelevant. By not reporting on what its inspectors find, it is not able to report accurately to Parliament on the quality of education in England. It has, in effect, ignored the enormous efforts of so many schools as well as some of the more disappointing and shameful evidence in a small minority.

It is too late now, but had Ofsted reported on what it saw rather than what it wanted to see, it is likely that this would have helped schools to feel supported and for staff to be valued for their incredible work during the pandemic. It may have helped to establish a much healthier ongoing dialogue between the inspectorate and schools, coming together with a genuine desire to improve the quality of children's experiences and their life chances.

Instead, the relationship between Ofsted and the schools it inspects was reaching its lowest ebb. Many thought it could not get worse but in March 2023 it did, and in a shocking and indescribably sad way. The mainstream media featured the breaking story of Caversham Primary School's inspection and the subsequent death of its headteacher, Ruth Perry. Suddenly Ofsted was on the front pages of all national newspapers and was lead item on all television news programmes. What followed was a clear indication that Ofsted was losing what little public support it had and losing it quickly. There were renewed calls to pause inspections, harking back to the February 2020 campaign. Once again, schools made clear they needed time to reflect, to 'catch their breath'. And once again, their voices were ignored, with Ofsted issuing a statement of 'regret' about the headteacher's suicide, alongside a resolve to continue business as usual amid the crisis.

As time went on and the days of lockdown moved further into the distance, Ofsted felt its decision to disregard the impact of the pandemic was increasingly justified. But almost every school leader I speak with has no doubt we are still living with the fallout from the Covid pandemic. Some believe Ofsted's denial and disregard, when it mattered most, could signal its demise because, unless it has the respect of society and the profession it inspects, its value is lost. It could also be a key factor in prolonging the issues that are having such a radical impact on staff and pupils.

A time for radical change

At the time of writing, confirmation of the appointment of a new chief inspector is imminent. If Ofsted as an organisation is genuinely committed to its stated aim of 'improving lives by raising standards in education', radical and urgent change is necessary. Ofsted's public relations battle was largely lost during the post-pandemic period; the organisation's failure to acknowledge this and to attempt to repair the damage has only exacerbated this hostile and counter-productive situation. As one teacher said, following the school's inspection in January 2022, 'They kicked us when we were down'.

The time for Ofsted to have played a positive role in post-pandemic recovery has well and truly passed; it missed the opportunity to foster a more productive relationship with schools. The time is right for the total abolition of Ofsted's obsessive target-driven culture and its ideological drive to establish a curriculum in its own image and likeness. It needs to work more closely with those it inspects with humility, with deep respect and with an open heart. It is clear that many of those it inspects are doing a better job than those who are actually inspecting. If it cannot shift its focus quickly, its days are numbered.

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six years. She currently works as a school development adviser and external examiner for providers of initial teacher education.

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Notes

1. <https://headteachersroundtable.wordpress.com/2020/02/09/pauseofsted/>
2. Gavin Williamson, 'Routine Ofsted inspections suspended in response to coronavirus', 17 March 2020: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/routine-ofsted-inspections-suspended-in-response-to-coronavirus>
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