

## **Ofsted Seeks Judgement-free Approach to ‘Stuck schools’ – but What about Its Own ‘Stuck’ Methods of Accountability?**

**Richard Brinton**

Ofsted – the Office for Standards in Education – is the organisation responsible for inspecting England’s schools. It was established in 1992 under the Education (Schools) Act 1992 as a national centralised inspectorate largely replacing the previous structure of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI), in which inspectors were based in Local Education Authorities.

Relationships with schools seriously declined under Ofsted, with ex-Ofsted head Chris Woodhead famously known during the 1990s for running battles with schools and teachers’ unions, accompanied by a new and ruthless fear-based high-stakes accountability regime, with a consequent decline in teacher morale. This has only worsened over the past decade, continuing in the present day under Ofsted’s current head, Amanda Spielman.

There are a number of reputable studies published over the years that have been very critical of Ofsted and its practices (see, for example, Duffy, 1996; Jeffrey & Woods, 1996; Cullingford, 1999; CEPPP, 1999; Case et al., 2000; House, 2000; Coffield, 2017); and last summer, I co-organised an Open Letter to Ofsted head Amanda Spielman (House, Brinton et al., 2019) in which we raised concerns about the effects of Ofsted’s high-stakes

accountability on schools and teachers, and the inconsistent and unreliable judgements given in its inspection reports.

It therefore seemed initially like a breath of fresh air to hear Ofsted’s recent announcement that they are seeking a ‘judgement-free approach to “stuck schools”’ (see Richardson, 2020) (where ‘stuck’ is defined as those schools not labelled ‘good’ since 2006), in an acknowledgement that the schools needed *help* to get out of a ‘rut’, not just chastisement for where they were. On first hearing, many schools and teachers breathed a sigh of relief.

‘We are recommending that the government funds Ofsted to trial a longer, deeper inspection approach with some of these schools, with the aim of not passing judgement but of enabling support to improve’, said Ofsted chief Amanda Spielman.

Was Ofsted finally coming to its senses in admitting that a collaborative approach was more effective than punitive high-stakes judgements? While our hopes and yearnings were riding high on reading headlines of a ‘judgement-free approach’, delving more deeply beyond the headlines reveals significant questions behind the sound-bites.

Some brief history. There exists the ‘blame game’, for which Ofsted is well known – as late as autumn 2018, Amanda Spielman was putting the blame on schools for their being ‘stuck in the rut of failure’ (see Adams, 2018). It was positive that Spielman recognised that league performance tables were causing a decline in educational quality. However, instead of drawing a logical conclusion that they should be scrapped, she again blamed schools for ‘gaming the system’ in putting test results above educational quality, and threatening to *punish* them for doing so. She conveniently forgot to consider that these test results and league table were what the government and parents were judging the schools on; and for some if not many schools, it was a matter of existential necessity to orientate themselves around them, in order to get funding. It was not what most teachers considered good education, but their arms were twisted behind their backs. Naturally, that Ofsted grades also are ‘performance tables’ and thus responsible for skewing educational quality was not mentioned by Spielman.

Some were more perceptive and up-front about the problems facing schools. Writers noted ‘that the government and the schools inspectorate [Ofsted] have only themselves to blame for a damaging league table culture’ (Thomas et al., 2017).

This January, Amanda Spielman, while admitting to ‘stuck’ schools needing help rather than judgement, again tried to point the finger of blame elsewhere. ‘Antagonistic unions’ were thwarting ‘stuck’ schools’ improvement! (Anon, 2020). She failed to consider what many have chronicled: viz. that once schools are labelled by Ofsted as ‘inadequate’ or requiring improvement, a downward spiral is often set in motion that is very difficult for schools to overcome – with teachers demoralised and many quitting, and it becoming hard to recruit new teachers (what teacher starting their career wants to come to a ‘stuck school’?). Many parents also pull their children out of such a labelled school under the impression that Ofsted’s judgements mean their children are suffering. The school’s finances also come under duress – all with the result that some are forced to be taken over by a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) – and others just close permanently. Those that survive are perhaps to be compared to Odysseus in his Herculean

efforts in avoiding being sucked into the whirlpool of Charybdis!

Mary Bousted, joint General Secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), noted that, while it’s a positive step to help schools that are languishing, rather than just beating them, Ofsted refuses to acknowledge their role in making it difficult, if not impossible, for schools to improve which are judged inadequate or in need of improvement (Bousted, 2020).

With the recent Ofsted announcement of help for ‘stuck’ schools, some schools which are struggling under a poor judgement may be thinking they will be helped, too. But don’t count on it. Ofsted has given names of (initially) some 410 schools nationwide which fall in this bracket. And labelling schools as one of the chosen 410 ‘stuck’ schools won’t stop parents and teachers leaving: ‘stuck’ becomes a new judgement grade, even worse than ‘requires improvement’.

The announcement by Ofsted therefore left me with a sour taste on the tongue. Ofsted over its near-30 year history has been well known for throwing in doses of carrots to make schools and public believe that perhaps they are nevertheless OK and want to improve education; but they have persisted in methodically pulling out the stick after each carrot, adamant in maintaining their authoritarian hand with its ‘punishment and reward’ culture, driven by data, grades, and high-stakes accountability regimes which stem from a bygone era.

The logical conclusion is to reform the whole inspection system with a generous infusion of humanistic educational values and practices, including the removal of the high-stakes accountability system. But that doesn’t seem to be an option on the Ofsted table. Truly, it is Ofsted which is stuck in a rut of failed methods.

## References

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