



REVIEW ESSAY

Beneath the Sky

Pushing back to Ofsted: Safeguarding and the Legitimacy of Ofsted's Inspection Judgements – A Critical Case Study, by Richard House, InterActions, Stroud, Gloucestershire, 2020, 126 pp, ISBN 978-0-9528364-2-1, paperback £10.99. Distributed by / available from Wynstones Press, Stourbridge UK – www.wynstonespress.com / info@wynstonespress.com (interactive e-book edition also available)

Reviewed by Faysal Mikdadi

Oh, many a time have I, a five years' child,
In a small mill-race severed from his stream,
Made one long bathing of a summer's day;
Basked in the sun, and plunged and basked
again
Alternate, all a summer's day, or scoured
The dandy fields, leading through flowery
groves
Of yellow ragwort; or when rock and hill,
The woods, and distant Skiddaw's lofty
height,
Were bronzed with deepest radiance, stood
alone
Beneath the sky, as if I had been born
On Indian plains, and from my mother's hut
Had run abroad in wantonness, to sport,
A naked savage, in the thunder shower.

William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book First

Introduction

From 1992, when Ofsted was first set up, till August 2016 I led Inspections in hundreds of secondary schools. I also took part as an

inspection team member in numerous Ofsted inspections of primary and secondary schools, SEND schools and Pupil Referral Units, and in universities and other organisations offering initial teacher training.

School evaluations of the inspection process always returned with glowing comments – except for one school that made an official complaint to Ofsted because its headteacher felt that our judgements were wrong. Ofsted revisited the school and found a face-saving way out of the complaint. The headteacher was still unhappy with the outcome.

One school wrote to Ofsted thanking them for sending me as the then Registered Inspector. In itself this would be a mere courtesy. However, the school concerned had been put into Special Measures. The headteacher felt that the inspection process was 'fair' and 'humane'. She added that she felt that the dialogic process employed by my team and myself was one that culminated in giving the school an agenda for improvement that it could work with. I was reprimanded by my line manager for being 'too

friendly’. On another inspection, a visiting HMI took me aside and suggested that I should try to ‘smile less’ because my demeanour was giving the school an impression that I might be ‘a walk-over’.

These are but two little anecdotes of the many experiences that I and my colleagues had during our inspection work. They are testaments to the veracity of House’s judgement in the book under review that Ofsted acts as an ‘enforcer’ using a ‘blunderbuss approach’ where it goes ‘beyond the regulations allowing varying interpretations of inspectors who then go on to inspect and measure compliance to these interpretations’.

These, and many other similar experiences, lead one to assume that Ofsted lives in a parallel universe that bears little connection to what goes on in the real world. Consequently, the so-called *Education Inspection Framework* is largely incapable of deviating from the one-model-fits-all ideology that propels its scrutiny, evidence gathering and judgements. It becomes impossible for blinkered inspectors to be able to see a particular school context of any kind. Ofsted has a clear idea of what constitutes good schooling: all else must be suspect, regardless of context or differing ideologies.

Those who were on inspections which I led would remember my stock response to any judgement offered: ‘So what?’ and ‘How does this impact on each child’s learning?’. They would also remember me telling them that the Ofsted *Framework* would fail any school that has a tinge of educational ideology derived from William Wordsworth, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Donald Winnicott, Jean Piaget, Melanie Klein, Rudolf Steiner and all such ‘oddballs’. Indeed, there is a delicious irony in Winnicott’s designation of ‘false self’ when a mother is too attached or over-protective of her child and is, consequently, incapable of responding to the child’s needs. This is so because Ofsted behaves precisely like such a mother, and so provokes the protective and debilitating response from the infantilised school professionals...etc....

Jean Jacques Rousseau, in his *Émile ou de l’éducation*, suggested that there were three laws / rules of education. The first one is:

‘La première loi est de nature psychologique: la nature a fixé les règles nécessaires du développement de l’enfant. Le corollaire éducatif de la première loi est que l’enseignant doit respecter la marche de l’évolution mentale de l’enfant.’ (‘The first rule is psychological in nature: nature has established the necessary imperatives of the child’s development. The corollary of this first rule is that the teacher must respect the progress of the child’s mental development.’ My translation.)

This ‘rule’ is clearly about the context within which a child is encouraged to learn, and it has a clear impact on the way that s/he learns. Ofsted’s response to the Steiner Waldorf system of education clearly eschews context, disregards the individual learner and focuses on the adjunctive issues of safeguarding, leadership, assessment strategies and outcome data.

I fully subscribe to William Wordsworth’s defiant stance in his ‘The Tables Turned’:

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

These eccentric sentiments do not fit into Ofsted’s worldview. No wonder that inspectors reacted so negatively to their visit to the Wynstones Steiner School, leading to the school’s speedy closure. Rudolf Steiner asseverated that we should ‘Receive the children with reverence, Educate them with love; Relinquish them in freedom’.

Richard House encapsulates the Steiner Waldorf education approach as follows: ‘In holistic Steiner Waldorf education, a core aim is to integrate head and heart, and mind and body, rather than keep them artificially split asunder at the behest of an outmoded consciousness.’ Who could argue with these aims?

On a minor point, page 48 of the e-book that I read contains a factual error. The first HMCI appointed in 1992 was Professor Stewart Sutherland. The late Sir Chris Woodhead was the second HMCI appointed in 1994. He remained in post until 2000. [This has now been corrected – RH, with thanks.]

Wynstones Steiner School

In January 2020 the Wynstones Steiner School had an Ofsted inspection which, on the basis of perceived failures in safeguarding, deemed the school provision ‘inadequate’. At the behest of the resultant Ofsted Report, the Department for Education promptly required the school to close.

In this book, Richard House successfully subjects the Ofsted report to a forensic analysis. As a result, the reader is left in no doubt that in making its decision the inspection team relied on perceptions, on preconceived ideas and on clear failure to understand the school’s context and its educational philosophy.

The book starts with a very readable Foreword by Professor Saville Kushner. Kushner strongly recommends that the best way to review schools is through a New Zealand-style School Review which ‘is conducted as a collaborative, developmental partnership between reviewers and teachers’. He adds that ‘school review is not accountability based, but oriented to change’.

In what House calls his ‘counter-report’, he assures the reader that he has ‘been very careful not to allow [his] feelings about what has happened to drown out the rational, academic case’ presented here. He does so with great professionalism and with consistent support from a very large number of recognised authorities.

House’s main thesis is that ‘Ofsted’s worldview about what constitutes “a good education” was being used as the metric by which to judge an educational approach’. In other words, Ofsted has a one-model-fits-all series of criteria which, in turn, causes school professionals to try hard to fit into Ofsted’s worldview in order to ‘pass’ the hoop-jumping assessment. Schools that have the courage to work according to a specific ideology that does not fit into Ofsted’s worldview are destined to be deemed to have ‘failed’ in their provision. Consequently, given Ofsted’s recorded animosity to the Steiner Waldorf system of education, the inspection in this particular school was doomed to fail before it even started. Indeed, the current HMCI wrote to the then Secretary of State for Education (31 January 2019) Damien Hinds in the

following terms: ‘...common failures are a result of the underlying principles of Steiner education.... Ofsted does not have a preferred model... fundamentals [include] good governance, clear lines of responsibility and effective safeguarding procedures’.

In the case of the Wynstones Steiner School, the focus by the inspection team in determining the school’s alleged inadequacy of provision rested almost exclusively on alleged safeguarding issues. It is interesting to note that among the so-called ‘fundamentals’, no mention is made of learning, of child development, of teachers promoting each child’s self-reliance, self-confidence, critical thinking and self-esteem. The main crux of the book seeks to show that the current obsession with safeguarding has been done at the expense of learning and the healthy development of a happy, confident, well-rounded and autonomous child. In the Steiner Waldorf education provisions, the latter are encouraged through working within the following three stages: (i) developing the limbs through doing; (ii) developing the heart through imagination; and (iii) developing the mind through discernment of the world. By their nature, these attempts at providing a ‘schooling experience [which] should be a freeing, creative-artistic, imaginative and above all humanising one’ include children taking risks. The current culture of risk-averse educational experience – indeed of significantly restricting a child’s freedom of action for fear of being hurt or done harm to – results in the ‘taming of childhood’, and in eventually creating infantilised adults who cannot cope with the world and with life’s vicissitudes.

House shows that Steiner Waldorf education produces youngsters who obtain better than average examination results and who do well at university and other further and higher education. They are also happier and more settled than many mainstream school students. This deficiency in mainstream schools is caused by what House calls ‘rule-bound procedures’ behind an audit system predicated on the surveillance of safeguarding provision to the nth degree. These poor students grow up behaving like ‘puppets on a string’ lacking independence, critical thinking skills and the resilience and self-determination that they need to make something worthwhile of their lives.

Infantilising the Professionals

Both Ofsted's approach, as well as the strong focus on the excessive over-protective safeguarding measures, have a deleterious effect on children's learning as well as on teachers' morale. Teachers working to a tick-list eventually lose their self-confidence and tend to play it safe. Consequently, they provide learning experiences that often lack creativity and independence, and that are frequently denuded of opportunities for experiencing the sheer joy of learning.

House also shows that schools are often pushed into a position of producing endless policies on safeguarding as well as on much else that they do. He argues quite powerfully that polices 'are there to convince incompetent leaders that... individually and institutionally, [they] are doing something' about their students' Health, Safety and Safeguarding Culture. It has never ceased to amaze me during my school visits to certainly hundreds, probably thousands, of schools how so-called leaders and managers focus a huge amount of effort, sweat and blood on producing meaningless policies. At its worst, these bizarre policy-led priorities and Ofsted's worldview appear to look at so much paper-pushing around the school except for the core purpose of the school: LEARNING. Policy-writing trumps policy-making any time, leading to the erosion of many teachers' professionalism and, in many cases, leading to teachers being treated 'like idiots'. As House shows, this often leads to dysfunctional organisations with teachers losing their 'professional agency'. House quotes the Finnish educationalist Pasi Sahlberg: 'accountability is what remains when responsibility is taken away'.

There is a lot of food for thought in House's 'counter-report'. It is difficult to determine what stands out as the strongest point being made (apart, that is, from the fact that Ofsted is a malign influence). To me the most powerful argument presented in House's book is the one that shows how the State has imposed a most unreasonable responsibility on schools and produced ways of ensuring compliance. One passage is worth quoting in full:

The implication of this specifically political-economic perspective on safeguarding is that schools as institutions are suffering enormously because of the way in which they are being unreasonably expected to compensate for, and effectively iron out, the massive socio-economic inequalities in late-modern society; and one consequence of this is the ruthless 'enforcer approach' of quasi-State institutions like Ofsted, who punish any school that does not unquestionably embrace its ideological commitment to what one might call 'manic safeguarding ideology'.

This form of Orwellian surveillance approach with its intrusions into every corner of life is, according to House, aimed at creating a world where 'children's development [is] being situated in free-market mechanisms influencing their socio-economic conditions of glaring inequality and poverty'. Indeed, the very act of looking at children through economic eyes means that the Steiner Waldorf humanising curriculum which seeks to feed children's imagination cannot possibly be contemplated. Heaven forbid that children should be children. Being children is so childish. And we, the adults, know best!

Conclusion

Amidst the many memories, both happy and sad, I will always carry the moving picture of a teacher whose lesson I was observing on behalf of Ofsted. I had before me the substantial early *Framework for the Inspection of Schools*. I sat at the back of the classroom and flicked through the *Framework* to ensure that I was making the right judgements on the right areas of teaching and learning. The head-spinning attempt to ensure that every 'item' was included on my Evidence Form meant that I had little time to engage with the students. In time, I learnt to ignore the *Framework* and use my common sense. That took a long time. It also meant that, whenever an HMI walked in to monitor my work, I returned to hugging the *Framework* all the way through!

Before me the teacher regularly returned to her desk, bent down over it and, picking up her pen, seemed to write something in her capacious

notebook. I was impressed because I thought that she was making assessment notes, ongoing evaluation of learning outcomes, etc.... I got up and edged towards her desk as the lesson came to an end. As she was preoccupied with dismissing the class, I sidled up to her desk and looked at the notebook. The page on which it was open had a very large grid listing teaching tasks performed with a tick entered against each task except the very last one, which said: 'Dismiss the class in an orderly fashion'.

This was truly an education system of policy-driven teaching and of auditing by a process of tick boxes. Where is the real core joy of learning in all of this?

House's book should be required reading in all teacher, school leader and inspector training

courses. I would also urge HMCI and the Secretary of State for Education to read it.

Dr Faysal Mikdadi has spent over 45 years in education in many capacities, including as an OfSTED lead and team inspector for 23 years (primary, secondary, SEN and ITT). Dr Mikdadi has been an independent consultant since 2002 with a diversity of specialisms, and he still visits schools supporting them across all areas of work both at primary and secondary phases, and runs voluntary poetry and creative workshops in secondary and primary schools across England.