

An Open Letter to Amanda Spielman (head of Ofsted), and to Steiner Schools Recently Rated “Inadequate” by Ofsted

25 June 2019

Dear Ms Spielman,

We are writing as educationalists to express our grave concerns about recent Ofsted decisions to grade a number of England’s Steiner schools as “Inadequate”. The high-stakes grading system which you use is not only unfair on those schools; it is in general inconsistent, unreliable, and lacks any sense of objectivity. As this letter will make clear, it has had profound negative consequences for the teaching profession, inhibiting professional pedagogical analysis and discussion. It is unfortunately something you insist on retaining, even in your new framework.

This letter should be seen as a wide-ranging challenge to, and critique of, your inspection organisation – with your recent treatment of England’s Steiner schools merely being the latest example of a long, well-documented history of Ofsted’s traumatising the schooling system. So while in what follows, we highlight the recent experience of Steiner schools subjected to the Ofsted inspection regime, the concerns we articulate here are relevant to *all* schools that fall under the remit of Ofsted.

First and foremost, there are several Steiner schools where the level of parental satisfaction with their school is measured at approaching an extraordinary 100 per cent, and yet which Ofsted has deemed to be “Inadequate”. In this age of parental rights and empowerment, in what conceivable circumstances can an organisation claim to know better than the parents what is fitting for those parents and children, when those parents deliberately choose to send their children to these schools based on a fully informed support for the Steiner ethos and pedagogy, and their children are extremely happy in those schools?

Secondly, can you please tell us how much inspectors knew about the Steiner ethos, and its many differences from mainstream Gradgrind education,¹ before they were unleashed on these schools? Steiner schools have a fundamentally different ethos and pedagogy from mainstream schooling, the subtlety and depth of which Ofsted’s managerialist bean-counter approach is distinctly ill-equipped to comprehend, let alone assess in an informed way.

Thus, two established Steiner schools have been criticised for not getting children ready for Class One by not teaching phonics in Kindergarten. Yet early phonics teaching completely contradicts Steiner Kindergarten pedagogy. Quoting one inspector’s formal judgement, “the school must ensure that there be a greater emphasis on the early teaching of phonics including in the last year of kindergarten”. This judgement is clearly based on ignorance of the school’s background, whereby a school is criticised and deemed “inadequate” by inspectors who are imposing an alien pedagogical ideology on to tried-and-tested Steiner pedagogy.

Moreover, such judgements are clearly uneven from Kindergarten to Kindergarten, when the curriculum and teaching style is very similar in Steiner Kindergartens across the country. In short, both the reliability and validity of these judgements are highly

suspect;² yet these are the very judgements used to rate schools “Inadequate”, and so threaten their very existence. This process violates any conceivable definition of natural justice.

As emphasised earlier, we are highlighting the recent experience of Steiner schools here because these events are very current, have demonstrably traumatised (and even outraged) the schools graded by you as “Inadequate”, and provide a contemporary, living case-study of the impact of the Ofsted regime on England’s schools. However, these issues are by no means confined to the Steiner movement, but have urgent relevance for *all* schools that fall under your organisation’s remit.

Thirdly, what confidence can anyone have in the reliability of an inspection system whereby a nursery was deemed “Good” on re-inspection three months after a previous “Inadequate” grading, even though nothing had changed? Or where other schools have gone from “Good” to “Inadequate” within a two-year period, despite, again, nothing significant having changed? These examples are actually taken from non-Steiner schools, and numerous examples could be given to illustrate the widespread unreliability and inconsistency of the Ofsted high-profile grading system.

It’s simply not good enough to cite the fact that standards for inspections have changed. How can it be a fair system which punishes and “names and shames” schools for trying to navigate completely new criteria? – which any school will know are complicated matters that need a huge commitment of resources and time. In our view, it would be far more productive to help schools through these enforced changes. To publicly label their efforts as “Inadequate”, under threat of closure or forced academisation, is punitive in the extreme. Any psychologist will give you chapter and verse on the negative effects this approach has on the self-esteem and professional identity of teachers and administrators.³

Fourthly, many have commented on how unrealistic it is for a two-day visit, spot-checking just certain classes, to be considered representative of a whole school, with even a former inspector having commented on these shortcomings.⁴ Yet such reports are literally determining the life and death of some schools – and in the case of the Steiner schools, a schooling system that has an auspicious 85-year history of success in these islands. How, in any conceivable world, can this be deemed to be fair?

More generally, it is now public knowledge that Ofsted has stated that what they deem to be “failing” Steiner schools could be shut down. You have yourself been quoted as saying that ministers must examine ‘the underlying principles of Steiner education and consider the extent to which they may have contributed to common failures’. Families who have deliberately chosen a Steiner school for their children in order to escape the creative desert that is testing-obsessed mainstream schooling are deeply distressed about this unwarranted attack on their education of choice, whose core aim is to produce free-thinking young people.

You have suggested that Steiner Waldorf schools may not be fit for our times, yet studies and experience have shown the opposite to be the case. You may wish to acquaint yourself with a major 2012 study, comparing pupils from different school systems, in which OECD statistician and researcher, PISA’s Andreas Schleicher himself notes: ‘There is a high degree of congruence between what the world demands of people and what is promoted to Waldorf pupils.’ They scored comparably

in exams, even slightly higher in the sciences, in spite of – or perhaps because of – the Steiner curriculum placing greater emphasis on the arts. But even more importantly, the pupils showed discernibly more joy and interest in learning. What is needed, Schleicher adds, is *creativity* in exploring new areas of knowledge.⁵ But these areas are impossible to assess within the fixed grading system to which Ofsted rigidly adheres.

You might respond by arguing that many of the poor ratings – and not just in Steiner schools – are based on new safeguarding guidelines. Yet how can a gross, catch-all “Inadequate” rating reflect accurately to the public that such a judgement is based largely upon insufficient paperwork and record-keeping (with which many schools struggle, given tight financing and staffing), and does not reflect any actual proven lack of safety? And how can such a high-stakes grading approach not generate a reactive, performative and punishment-avoiding response on the part of recipients of these crassly simplistic gradings?

While we note that your organisation is recently claiming to be moving to a less mechanistic inspection process, the draconian four-point grading system remains, which will continue to be the death knell of innovation and full ownership of any change process. Moreover, considerable damage has already been done. For approaching three decades, the professional identity and autonomy of teachers have been under concerted assault from Ofsted and the noxious “audit and accountability culture”; and the impact on the morale and mental health of teachers and children alike is widely regarded to have been catastrophic. (Cf note 3.)

Anyone teaching in universities has also seen the appalling fall-out – with students less able to think critically and exercise their own learning autonomy, having been fed on a relentless diet of narrow, unimaginative test-driven teaching and examinations (through no fault of teachers), and the accompanying tyranny of being “governed by numbers”.⁶

The psyche of our whole schooling system has been comprehensively colonised by decades of this Gradgrindism. Schools are blamed by both Ofsted and the government for “teaching to the test”; schools and universities are villainised for excluding pupils who don’t bring the potential for raising scores. Yet does your organisation ever inform the public of the real reasons for this “aberrant” behaviour, which even the schools and teachers themselves detest? It is because they are driven to it by the highly distorting high-stakes testing and league-tables regime, with Ofsted’s insultingly simplistic gradings added for “good” measure – all of which, taken together, govern and determine their very existence.

The evidence is clear, then, that your organisation represents a failing model. Shortly after Ofsted was founded, the international PISA studies started to examine the skills of 15-year-olds in maths, reading and science. Since the year 2000, the UK’s achievements in all these areas have actually fallen. In other words, **neither the inspection regimes nor its various framework changes have had any discernible effect on progress, achievements or standards in England’s schools.**

Seen globally, therefore, your positive impact has been negligible, while at the same time you have created **a national mood of stress and fear**. Within Europe, Switzerland, Estonia, the Netherlands, Finland, Denmark, Slovenia, Belgium,

Germany, Ireland, Poland, Norway, Austria, Sweden, Russia and France all come above the UK in the PISA ratings – and many of these countries have little or even no inspection framework at all.

So *by your own standards*, you are clearly an “Inadequate” organisation; so how, in any fair universe, can it be legitimate for an inadequate organisation to have the power to judge other organisations as “Inadequate”, and so threaten their very existence?

Given the highly problematic nature of the Ofsted grading system and its questionable validity, in our view and as already argued, the whole approach to inspection evaluation and judgement needs root-and-branch transformation to a far more collaborative approach – one which *inspires* schools to improve, rather than perpetuating an antiquated behaviourist system of punishment and rewards, thereby leaving schools having to live in a state of perpetual fear around inspections, with all its negative impacts on the quality of teaching – which your own research studies have noted.

One doesn't have to look very far for a viable alternative. Wales already has a far more constructive inspection system under ESTYN. Current reforms ‘stress the need to adopt a positive mindset’ utilising the principle of subsidiarity, ‘whereby power stays as close as possible to the action’. Further reforms are to abolish headline gradings altogether, in favour of the kind of constructive, collaborative approach that we are also advocating here.⁷ No Steiner School, nor any other credible educational institution in the land, is against public scrutiny and critical self-evaluations; rather, it is the Ofsted model that fails tests of educational validity and so makes for a dangerous and capricious partner.

Consider the following, for example:

*“High-stakes accountability systems can lead to significant, negative unintended consequences. In addition to the stress that these systems inevitably place on schools and their pupils, such cultures can divert attention from meeting the needs of young people as individuals as schools seek to disguise weaknesses and present themselves in as good a light as possible. Undue attention may be given to those pupils whose marginal improvement will affect performance figures.... **At its worst it can inculcate a culture of fear, inhibiting creativity and genuine professional analysis and discussion.**”* (note 7; our italics)

In our view, as Ofsted seems incapable of significantly changing its regime and approach, the only realistic way to reverse the malaise is to replace Ofsted with a supportive inspectorate that empowers, rather than punishes, bullies and publicly humiliates.

We await your detailed response to our challenge to your organisation's unfair and misguided treatment of some of England's Steiner and other schools with interest and grave concern.

Yours sincerely,

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Richard Brinton, former Principal of Hawkwood College, Stroud; editor of *Growing up Healthy in a World of Digital Media*

Rowan Williams, University of Cambridge, former Archbishop of Canterbury

Sir Tim Brighouse

Titus Alexander, FRSA, independent educator

Dr Serge Beddington Behrens, psychotherapist and writer

Jay Beichman Ph.D., counsellor/psychotherapist

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Dr Simon Boxley, Senior Lecturer in Education Studies, University of Winchester

Dr Onel Brooks, psychotherapist, Senior Lecturer in Psychotherapy and Counselling

John Coe, National Association for Primary Education

Frank Coffield, Emeritus Professor of Education, UCL Institute of Education, London University

Dr Sharie Coombes, author and child, adolescent and family psychotherapist; former primary headteacher

David Curtis, former school inspector

Professor Will Curtis, Academic Director for Partnerships, University of Warwick

Danny Dorling, Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography, University of Oxford

Dr Gail Edwards, Lecturer in Education, Newcastle University

Emeritus Professor David Egan, Cardiff School of Education, Cardiff Metropolitan University; Joint Editor, *Wales Journal of Education*

Wendy Ellyatt, CEO of the Save Childhood Movement

Nigel Gann, Hamdon Education, School Governor; author *Improving School Governance*; National Teaching Award 2007

Dr Alison Green, Psychologist and Higher Education professional

Dave Hill, Emeritus Professor of Education, Anglia Ruskin University

Paul Hoggett, Emeritus Professor of Social Policy, UWE

Peter Humphreys, Centre for Personalised Education

Professor Stephen Joseph, University of Nottingham

Saville Kushner, Professor of Educational Evaluation, Edge Hill University, Liverpool

Professor Marilyn Leask, co-editor since 1994, *Learning to Teach in the Secondary School: A Companion to School Experience* (Routledge)

Professor Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, Director of the Centre for International Research in Childhood: Literature, Culture, Media

David Lorimer, educational consultant and author

Dr Alpesh Maisuria, Senior Lecturer in Education Studies, Co-convenor of the 8th International Conference on Critical Education (ICCE)

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Professor Jayne Osgood, Centre for Education Research & Scholarship, Middlesex University

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Dr Ian Thompson, Associate Professor of Education, University of Oxford
Professor Brian Thorne, Emeritus Professor of Counselling, University of East Anglia and former Professor of Education, College of Teachers
Sally Tomlinson, Emeritus Professor
Professor Dave Trotman, Professor of Education Policy, Newman University, Birmingham
Professor Tony Watts, OBE, Emeritus Professor of Career Development, University of Derby
Professor Terry Wrigley, Northumbria University
Dr Patrick Yarker, University of East Anglia
Dr Sarah Younie, Professor of Education Innovation, De Montfort University, Leicester

cc Theresa May, Prime Minister; Right Hon. Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the opposition; Sir Vince Cable MP; The Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds; the Shadow Education Secretary, Angela Rayner; members of the Parliamentary Education Committee; all national newspapers, with an accompanying press release

References

- 1 Simon Jenkins, 'A Gradgrind ethos is destroying the school system', *The Guardian*, 26 October, 2018; available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/26/gradgrind-ethos-school-exams-special-educational-needs>.
- 2 See Chris Parr, 'The challenge of inadequate Ofsted reports', *Times Educational Supplement*, 16 February 2018; available at <https://www.tes.com/magazine/article/challenge-inadequate-ofsted-reports>.
- 3 See, for example, Bob Jeffrey and Peter Woods, 'Feeling deprofessionalised: the social construction of emotions during an OFSTED inspection', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 26 (3), 1996, pp. 325–43; reprinted as Chapter 4 in their *Testing Teachers: The Effects of Inspections on Primary Teachers*, Routledge, 1998.
- 4 Tom Sherrington, 'Ofsted Inspection is deeply flawed – says a serving inspector', *teacherhead* blog, 13 July 2018, available at <https://teacherhead.com/2018/07/13/ofsted-inspection-is-deeply-flawed-says-a-serving-inspector/>.
- 5 Sylva Liebenwein et al, 'Bildungserfahrungen an Waldorfschulen. Empirische Studie zu Schulqualität und Lernerfahrungen', VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2012.
- 6 See Stephen J. Ball (ed.), *Governing by Numbers: Education, Governance and the Tyranny of Numbers*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2017.
- 7 See <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/education/how-school-inspections-going-change-14751827>; and 'A Learning Inspectorate – An independent review of Estyn', by Graham Donaldson, June 2018; available at <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/sites/default/files/documents/A%20Learning%20Inspectorate%20-%20en%20-%20June%202018.pdf>.