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MENTAL CRUELTY AND INADEQUATE
METHODOLOGY?

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Mental cruelty and inadequate methodology?

Professor Carol Fitz-Gibbon looks critically at the Inspection Framework for Schools and argues that in its current form OFSTED is likely to do more harm than good to educational standards

"Mental cruelty" is rather strong. Do I exaggerate? The head of one of the "failed" primary schools has taken early retirement at the age of 42 and is utterly shattered by the experience and there was no adequate evidence that the primary school was in any way "failing". In another case, a school which had had the same Head for more than a dozen years was declared failing in the year in which he was retiring. His career ended in public humiliation and, again, the report was ludicrously unconvincing. (Some extracts are reproduced in the Box.) Furthermore, if the school was failing, what had the LEA been doing about this? The examples proliferate. One independent consultant said "I am a shoulder to cry on, and believe me they cry". Is this what we want for the teaching profession: Personnel management by public humiliation?

Undoubtedly schools should be inspected. However, the inspection process should concentrate on that which can best be accomplished by inspection: an audit of school procedures and checks on legal requirements such as health and safety and curriculum provision. Instead OFSTED has been handed a poisoned chalice which they have foolishly accepted. They have been told to concentrate on assessing standards of achievement, both absolute and relative to pupils' abilities. But can a team of (poorly trained) inspectors in fact accomplish this feat by the method of an announced week of visits? If inspectors can guess the effectiveness of teachers by sitting in a few pre-prepared classes, they should offer proof that they can – and this they have never even attempted to do. And if OFSTED inspectors are not accurate then they are not fair. If they are not fair then they are a disaster because their influence on schools and on teachers is powerful. It is not an exaggeration to say that OFSTED inspections have ruined careers and devastated individuals. Equally they will have declared some teaching to be satisfactory which is not, thus hampering improvement efforts.

The head of OFSTED, Chris Woodhead, likes to imply that such

careers as have been ruined needed to be, in the interests of the children. Children have only one chance in school. Poor teachers must be removed. I don't think many teachers would disagree with the position that poor teachers must be removed from the classroom, but is OFSTED the way either to identify poor teachers or to remove them? The identification of poor teachers by OFSTED is only acceptable if their methods are highly reliable and accurate and if there is no cheaper, more dignified and humane way to accomplish the same end. Driving out teachers by public humiliation is an appalling way to treat a profession we value enormously – especially when the teachers driven out may be the wrong ones.

Not only does the labelling of a school as failing devastate individuals but it undermines public confidence and upsets the community, parents and children. In many cases there will be no feasible alternative school available. What are children to make of attending the "failing school"? What are parents to do?

Some teachers hurt by OFSTED may be achieving good results but using methods that the particular inspector thinks are not "good practice". But what is "good practice"? Vague generalities are easy to propound but there is no sound evidence which shows that certain methods are always preferable to other methods or that classroom observers can reliably identify effective teaching. There is no bible for teaching methods, no established "good practice" which can be used to judge teachers. Teachers should be judged by their results, not by the methods observed during the OFSTED week of charades.

Where is the evidence that the OFSTED inspection is adequately accurate? It is nothing short of amazing that OFSTED inspectors are taken seriously when:

- they have never justified the size of the samples they draw (the number of teachers and pupils interviewed; the number of lessons observed)
- they have never dealt with the issue of the unrepresentative nature of the sample they observe (the week of charades)
- they have never published any studies of the extent to which dif-

ferent inspectors agree with each others' judgements.

If inspectors disagree substantially then the rating a school receives is a matter of the luck of the draw. If they all did agree then perhaps it would imply they know a model, an ideal lesson, in which case this extraordinary knowledge should be shared with everyone. The vacillation of Chris Woodhead, was successfully parodied by Professor Ted Wragg in the *Times Educational Supplement* showing how Mr. Woodhead's views had changed over the years. Teachers naturally worry as to which year's views will hold sway when his inspectors visit their school.

They have never published any studies of the validity of their estimates of the standards being achieved. For example, if schools judged "failing" are in fact obtaining results as good as other schools working with similar pupils, how fair is the judgement?

How can OFSTEDs classroom inspection methods be tested? The test would involve having OFSTED inspectors make their judgements about various school departments on the basis of the (very expensive) method of sitting in classes and then comparing this with the (very economical) method of analysing data on pupils' progress (these days called "value added").

If inspectors can judge effectiveness by watching a few elaborately prepared lessons from a nervous teacher, then their judgements should match the data on pupil progress. It is obvious that the judgements would have to be made without the inspectors having any access to the data. Yet the response to a letter suggesting that such a test be made was a reply drawing my attention to a clause in the OFSTED legislation which states that schools must give their data to inspectors or face a "level 2" fine. (Unused to being treated like criminals, teachers don't seem to know what a level 2 fine is but it sounds unpleasant). This ostrich-like approach prevents OFSTED inspectors from obtaining feedback on their own effectiveness. Combine this with the almost necessary deference teachers have to show towards inspectors and you can see that an OFSTED inspector is likely to become more over-confident than is justified.

Inspection is bad for the personality of inspectors.

I used to find OFSTED's threats and foolish acceptance of an impossible assignment (the poisoned chalice) amusing. Lately, having heard of the devastation of teachers' careers, the emotional stress, the wasted efforts and the dangerous misleading of schools and the public, I can no longer see OFSTED as funny, but rather as culpable and unprofessional.

The crux of the matter is that there is a professional and moral obligation on OFSTED to demonstrate the validity of their procedures and until that task has been satisfactorily accomplished they should consume no more public funds. Their budget of about 100 million pounds per year could be better spent.

At the very least they could take some advice from the inspection system set up by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) which inspects colleges. Instead of closed meetings within which differences between inspectors can be hidden from the school, the FEFC inspectors have a member of the college staff with them at all times. Their approach is respectful and professional but no less demanding. Their document *Assessing Achievement* talks of "a developing system" and "a dialogue between assessors and assessed". FEFC inspectors urge colleges to use quantitative indicators and they are not enjoined by their legislation to label entire institutions as failing. They recognise the diversity within any school or college.

Many inspectors are well aware of the problems but have to undertake the work because LEA jobs have vanished. One of them said "It stinks. The only people happy with it are those into a power game." So who will defend the profession? And who will accept teaching positions in schools likely to be labelled at risk or failing? And how can this inquisition, this system resting not on evidence but on guesses about effectiveness, improve education? It can't. It will only undermine it in the long term and, if not changed drastically and soon, it will delay the introduction and use of better methods.

An OFSTED report:

"The organisation and administration of the school are satisfactory and daily routines are well-established."

"The pupils' attendance record is satisfactory overall although a minority of pupils arrive late. The attendance registers are well kept and are in accordance with the requirements of Circular 11/91."

"The school is a caring community: teachers are concerned about the pupils' welfare and standards of behaviour are generally satisfactory." (So we have an inner city school with 56% of pupils on free school meals, good attendance and a caring staff. Why, then, was this school declared "failing"?)

"Most teachers work hard to serve the interests of the children but are not given the guidance and structure which would allow them to be fully effective." (NO data on teacher effectiveness was presented. So we are asked simply to accept an opinion).

"The co-ordinator [of English] has written a scheme of work but this requires elaboration and refinement and is not in use." (Of course it's not - it was only written for OFSTED. Why does OFSTED have this ritualistic belief in writing things down? Did Socrates have a scheme of work? Perhaps teachers can remember what they are doing without writing it down. Maybe they prefer to prepare lessons and work with pupils rather than write elaborate plans.

"The school development plan has been drawn up by groups of staff but it lacks detail and does not identify correctly the major issues currently facing the school." ("Correctly" according to whom?)

"The school promotes satisfactorily the social and moral development of the pupils, but not their spiritual and cultural development." (OFSTED deserve an award for subtlety! Can they truly make such finely differentiated assessments of such difficult concepts? Of course they can't. If they can, let them prove it).