

It's Official – Ofsted Will Soon Become Schizophrenic

It's rather marvellous that the leader of one of the great inquisitorial powers in the land – the modern Star Chamber that is known as Ofsted – has finally admitted that those who actually work in education have been right all along: its inspection and judgement criteria are destroying the creativity of our schools and undermining the quality of education our children receive.

Under the direction of Amanda Spielman, Ofsted has now discovered that its reliance on its hitherto-beloved performance data, based on milestones, tests and exams is not really improving schools at all but just testing schools' ability to jump through hoops, in much the same way as tests and exams just test the ability to do tests and exams. 'Schools,' it now says, should stop cramming for tests, 'eroding the breadth and depth of the curriculum in the process.'

Schools, it now also shockingly says 'Often lose sight of the purpose of education'. Schools should no longer design assessments on what it want Ofsted to see but what will enhance pupils' education journey, its National Director Sean Harford adds.

What, one must ask, have schools been doing devoting so much time and energy to meeting the performance requirements? How much damage has been done to the life chances of children whose natural talents have been jammed into ebacc subjects and endless, suffocating lessons on teaching of Maths and English, Maths and English and more Maths and English in primary schools.?

One might also ask how many careers of head teachers have been tragically cut short by unfavourable, data-driven Ofsted reports following one year's difficult cohort?

But lets put all this historic griping aside and look more closely at the chink of educational light that has flickered into life at the end of a very long, dark tunnel. It's a work-in-progress, and there is nothing very certain, yet one can discern a definite shift from quantitative towards a qualitative review of a school's provision.

How to measure quality, however, is enormously difficult, especially in a way that creates consistent standards, and creating a level playing field across the country is *mind-blowingly* difficult. Three conceptual tools are suggested for inspectors: Intent, Implementation and Impact. Intent will force schools to consider more deeply what their teaching and learning mission is. This is likely to see an explosion of a new army of consultants creating mission statements and Implementation strategies. A lot of the creativity that exited within school leaderships and indeed within teachers 30 years ago has been snubbed out by the micro management of the government and by its enforcement agency... Ofsted.

Measuring Impact of this deeper richer curriculum in ways other than the exam passes and SAT results will require assessment tools that don't yet exist here in the UK. We respectfully suggest that Ofsted beetles off to the USA and explores some of the work on new forms of assessment that measure cognitive skill, collaboration, curiosity, commitment to learning and self-study, which are being developed under the Common Core Curriculum.

Training inspectors in this qualitative assessment of schools will be a major headache as many of the existing inspectors were less than exciting pedagogues themselves. And what will happen when they come up against the performance gap which will inevitably occur when schools drop the data whip and switch to deeper learning experiences that cover the curriculum in less programmatic and more elliptical, richer ways?

Will inspectors, when they meet heads who have binned the ebacc in order to give their children a richer, more meaningful education experience, give them a reassuring hug and say 'F...! ebacc and the league tables ! I am going to give you an 'Outstanding' for making education more imaginative and exciting'?

What is likely to happen, of course, is that this chink of light, though real and welcome as it is, will be constrained by the external political realities, and the crushing legacy Ofsted has itself created. It's likely that this new emphasis of an ill-defined quality will co-exist as another contradictory hoop that heads have to jump through.

The 'balance' Amanda Spielman is looking for simply doesn't exist!

Her dash for quality will remain a well-meaning, but difficult, fudge for schools, for as long as the main question Spielman raises isn't answered properly, 'What Is the main purpose of the curriculum and what does a quality education look like?'

Howard Sharron